



Self-Injury: The End of The Journey of Helplessness

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ABSTRACT

The inability of an individual to cope with adverse circumstances constitutes a form of learned helplessness. An individual who has experienced learned helplessness is likely to encounter persistent challenges and consistently fail in their efforts to surmount these difficulties. The subjects of this study were four individuals between the ages of 18 and 22, selected through the use of purposive sampling. This study employs a phenomenological research approach, utilizing interviews as the primary data collection technique. The data were validated through member checking and analyzed using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method. The findings indicated that self-injury represents a manifestation of learned helplessness in response to the subject's life challenges. The inability to overcome the difficulties encountered results in the assumption that no effort can be made, thereby leading to the development of self-harm as a means of redirecting emotions associated with these challenges.

Keywords: Helplessness, Journey, Self-Injury

INTRODUCTION

It is inevitable that every individual will encounter challenges and difficulties in their lifetime. Conversely, individuals may experience and address challenges in disparate ways. Some individuals demonstrate proficiency in problem-solving, whereas others occasionally exhibit deficiencies in this capacity. The inability to resolve problems can give rise to a range of negative emotional states, including sadness, disappointment, hopelessness, depression, helplessness, frustration, anger, and resentment (Safaria & Saputra, 2009). It is possible for individuals to direct their emotions in a constructive and healthier manner. The constructive channeling of emotions can be achieved through the engagement in preferred activities, such as writing or exercising (Santoso, 2021). (Santoso, 2021; Yuliawan & Bektı, 2020). However, some individuals direct their emotions toward harmful behaviors, such as substance abuse, self-harm, and other self-destructive actions (Tong & Benjamin Chun-Kit Tong, 2017; Sinha, 2022; Van Hedger et al., 2021; Apsari, 2022).

One of the coping mechanisms employed by individuals in response to stressful circumstances is self-harm. As defined by the American Psychological Association (APA, 2018), non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) is a deliberate act of self-harm. Such actions may result in bleeding, bruising, pain, or the infliction of harm upon oneself, albeit without the intention of ending one's life. There are numerous methods through which an individual may inflict harm upon themselves. These include striking the head, pulling out hair, scratching, burning, biting, and cutting specific body parts, such as the arms, hands, and thighs, with sharp objects (Thippaiah et al., 2021). An individual who engages in NSSI may be concerned that their behavior is unknown to others and may result in fatal injuries and even unconsciousness. The results of a survey conducted among adolescents (18-24 years) and early adults (25-34 years) indicated that 40% of respondents had suicidal thoughts and engaged in self-harm. Furthermore, approximately 56% of survey participants reported engaging in self-injury (Putra, 2021).

Individuals who engage in self-injury exhibit a range of underlying factors, including elevated levels of distress, emotional dysregulation, negative thought patterns, self-criticism, and a strong motivation to inflict pain upon themselves (Gregory et al., 2017). Additionally, individuals who engage in self-harm are also influenced by a range of factors, including familial, personal, and historical elements. A lack of social support, conflict within the family unit, and an unharmonious marriage are factors that contribute to an individual's propensity to engage in self-injury. An individual who experiences stress, is unable to regulate emotions, has an impaired self-image, uses alcohol, and tends to suppress feelings, frustration, and depression may also be at risk of engaging in self-injury. Furthermore, adverse experiences in the past, such as abuse, bullying, and neglect, can contribute to the emergence of negative emotions (Vergara et al., 2019; Thippaiah et al., 2021).

In accordance with the criteria set forth in the DSM-5, a person may be considered to have engaged in self-injury only if they meet a number of specific conditions. Firstly, the self-injurious behavior must have occurred for a minimum of five days within the past year. Secondly, there are underlying motivations for engaging in self-injury, which can be broadly classified into three categories: the elimination of negative thoughts or emotions, the resolution of interpersonal challenges, and the promotion of positive states. Thirdly, the behavior must be preceded by negative thoughts or feelings, conflict with others, a focus on the behavior that is difficult to resist returning to, or recurrent thoughts about the behavior. Fourthly, the behavior in

question must result in a disruption or distress to the individual's daily life. Additionally, self-injury behavior must not occur concurrently with another mental disorder.

The behavior of self-injury can be explained using the behavioral theory of operant conditioning as proposed by Skinner. When an individual engages in a behavior and experiences a sense of satisfaction, the likelihood of that behavior repeating itself increases, thereby integrating it into the individual's repertoire of actions (Nevid, et al., 2003). Four potential scenarios exist for individuals who engage in self-harm. 1) The term intrapersonal negative reinforcement is defined as a process whereby the occurrence of reinforcement is followed by a decrease or cessation of negative thoughts or feelings. 2) Intrapersonal positive reinforcement is typified by an increase in desirable thoughts or feelings, such as the sense of satisfaction derived from self-punishment. 3) Interpersonal negative reinforcement is defined as reinforcement that is followed by a decrease or cessation of some social event, such as the cessation of peer bullying or parental conflict. 4) Positive interpersonal reinforcement is defined as reinforcement that is followed by an increase in a desired social event, such as receiving attention or social support.

Similarly, self-injurious behavior can be considered a form of positive reinforcement. Those who engage in self-injury seek to gain a sense of release from the helplessness they experience in the face of the problems they are confronted with through the act of self-harm. The results of the interviews indicate that self-harming behavior serves as a means of regulating emotional states. Although the initial experience of pain is present, the subsequent sense of satisfaction is derived from the release of emotions through self-harm. An individual may attempt to address the issue at hand, yet the approach may diverge from the anticipated outcome. Therefore, individuals who experience pain as a result of ongoing challenges may turn to self-injury as a means of coping.

The subject's inability to achieve the anticipated outcomes from his efforts led him to conclude that he would perpetually fail to resolve his issues. This condition is referred to as "learned helplessness," which is characterized by an individual's perception of inability to overcome adverse events in their life (Ananda & Hamidah, 2019). Moreover, Seligman (1975) posits that learned helplessness signifies an individual's inability to cope with the adverse circumstances they encounter. Adverse conditions may arise due to traumatic experiences, as evidenced by subjects who have experienced bullying and sexual harassment. This assertion aligns with one of the factors identified by Walker (2009), namely that traumatic or hostile childhood experiences contribute to the development of learned helplessness. This condition is associated with a decline in motivational, cognitive, and emotional functioning, as the individual is unable to avoid the onset of beliefs when confronted with similar circumstances (Seligman, 1975).

Those who engage in self-injury tend to exhibit pessimistic attitudes towards problem-solving. They often attribute negative events to their own mistakes and assume that their efforts will not yield positive outcomes (Miller, 2006). The subject indicated that when he made a mistake, there was no possibility of attempting to rectify the situation, and therefore self-harm represented an effective means of punishing himself. Sarafino and Smith (2012) posit that individuals who experience uncontrollable side effects engage in a cognitive process. This cognitive process is referred to as "attribution".

Three distinct cognitive processes are observed in individuals experiencing helplessness. The internal-external process involves an evaluation of one's capabilities, wherein an individual may perceive their inability to cope with stressors, whether internal or external. To illustrate, an individual who ascribes responsibility for his failures to himself may perceive his inability to cope with stressful situations as a consequence of his internal state. Secondly, the stable-unstable process refers to the manner in which an individual assesses the duration of the stress they are experiencing. This can be classified as either long-lasting (stable) or temporary (unstable). If he perceives the stress to be enduring, he will conclude that he will never succeed and will consistently fail. Thirdly, the global, specific process, whereby the generalization of past failures leads to the conviction that such adverse events will persist and that all future efforts will prove futile (Sarafino & Smith, 2012).

The experience of helplessness is exacerbated when an individual is subjected to emotional distress or an uncontrollable state of stress (Wang et al., 2017). Those who employ maladaptive problem-solving or coping strategies, including self-injury, may exacerbate feelings of helplessness due to the ineffective management of stress. In light of the aforementioned explanations, the researcher is interested in pursuing research on the relationship between self-injury and helplessness. This study aims to elucidate the nature of helplessness in individuals who engage in self-injury.

METHOD

Research Design

This research employs a qualitative approach utilizing a phenomenological research design. This methodology was selected based on the premise that individuals who engage in self-injury are unable to cope with negative situations, which in turn shapes their beliefs and leads them to resort to self-injury as a coping mechanism.

Sampling

The participants in this study were four individuals between the ages of 18 and 22 who had engaged in self-injury for a period exceeding one year. Three of the participants were female, and one was male. The subjects were selected through purposive sampling, with specific criteria in place to ensure data quality. The participants in this study were selected via the distribution of an online questionnaire across social media platforms. The collected participants were selected according to the necessary criteria for engaging in self-injury within one year. Following selection, participants provided consent forms before the interview commenced.

Data Collection

In this study, data were collected through the use of interviews. The interview method employed was semi-structured. The primary rationale for employing semi-structured interviews in this study was the flexibility afforded by this approach to inquire about pertinent issues and to structure the interview in a manner that facilitated the flow of information. The interviews were conducted for a duration of 70 minutes, with two interviews conducted on each subject. Furthermore, member checking was used to validate the accuracy of the data provided by informants and to obtain additional information from subjects when necessary. The interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed.

Data Analyst

The data obtained from the interviews were subjected to analysis using the interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA). The analysis process was conducted in several stages, including: 1) Transcription of the interview results and thorough examination of the content; 2) repeated reading of the transcripts to gain understanding of the subject's experience; 3) preliminary note-taking based on the transcripts; 4) identification of themes emerging in each subject's responses based on the notes taken; and 5) formation of superordinate themes from each participant. The superordinate themes were formed by grouping the emerging themes that were deemed necessary for the research. Subsequently, master themes were created by identifying the relationships between superordinate themes across subjects.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research is divided into three major themes that describe helplessness in people who commit self injury.

Causes of Self Injury

Self-injury can be a form of emotional release from traumatic experiences that have occurred in the past. Peer relationships have been identified as a contributing factor in the occurrence of self-injury. Individuals who experience bullying at school and lack peer acceptance are more likely to engage in self-harm (Esposito et al., 2019). This research was conducted in accordance with the subject's stated interests and experiences. The subject had been a victim of bullying since middle school.

"Iya, soalnya dari SMP. Dari SD jadi korban bullying, terus smp itu makin parah. Bullying nya. Pernah mau nyoba gitu, tapi masih takut, masih takut sakit, sampe nggak jadi" (312-313) (Indonesian)

"Yes, the problem is from junior high school. From elementary school being a victim of bullying, then junior high school it got worse. The bullying. I once wanted to try it, but I was still afraid, still afraid of getting sick, so I didn't" (312-313)

In their 2016 study, Kelada and colleagues demonstrated a correlation between low-income family functioning and self-harm behaviors. Stewart (1992) posits that low-income family functioning may manifest as ineffective communication, a lack of familial support and affection, and a lack of shared time. The subjects in this study exhibited poor communication with their families, with conflicts occurring between parents and instances of infidelity leading to divorce and a subsequent lack of communication when all family members were at home.

"Hemmm, hampir jarang berkomunikasi sih Jadi gini, pagi bangun terus berangkat kerja. Habis selesai kerja, pulang, tidur. Udah itu doang. Jadi nggak ada komunikasi apapun sama orang tua" (106-110) (Indonesian)

"Hemmm, almost rarely communicate anyway. So here's the thing, wake up in the morning and go to work. After finishing work, go home, sleep. That's it. So there is no communication whatsoever with parents" (106-110)

"Biasanya ya, keluarga aku lebih orang tua itu kayak ribut gitu, aku nggak ikut campur. Nilai juga waktu itu, aku udah usaha hasilnya nihil. Hubungan ku juga renggang. Terus akhirnya hubungannya juga hancur. Satu paket gitu" (519-521) (Indonesian)

"Usually, my family, especially my parents, is like a fuss, I don't interfere. The value was also at that time, I tried everything to no avail. My relationship is also tenuous. Then finally the relationship also broke down. One package" (519-521)

"....Tapi sebelumnya memang saya depresi itu karena orang tua saya cerai kak. Terus ditambah dengan kejadian itu" (622-623) (Indonesian)

"..... But before that, I was depressed because my parents were divorced. Then coupled with that incident"

The dissolution of the parents' marriage had a profound psychological impact on the subject. Furthermore, the loss experienced by family members is undoubtedly traumatic for the subject. As evidenced by research conducted by Tatnell (2016), grief experienced in the past or recently also serves as a contributing factor in the probability of self-harm. The abuse experienced is subsequently transformed into a traumatic event that is challenging to recall. Even victims who experience relaxation may ultimately be traumatized (Mingliio, 2009).

"Iya ka, tentu berat. Tapi itu karena masa lalu saya kak. Saya trauma. Soalnya saya pernah diperkosa sama kakak tiri saya" (617-618) (Indonesian)

"Yes, of course it's hard. But that's because of my past. I was traumatized. I was raped by my stepbrother" (617-618)

"Kakak tiri aku itu pulang kak. Aku benci banget sama dia. Aku pengen mukul sama jambak dia. Bahkan aku pengen banget bunuh dia. Tapi aku nggak bisa. Apalah aku ni di rumah, nggak dianggap. Jadinya aku luapin aja ke diri aku sendiri kak" (663-665) (Indonesian)

"My stepbrother came home. I really hate her. I wanted to hit him and grab him. I even really want to kill him. But I can't. What am I at home, not considered. So I just took it out on myself" (663-665)

"Dia nggak ngelakuinnya cuma sekali mbak. Aku udah kayak jadi bulan-bulannya dia dari dulu" (686-687) (Indonesian)

"He didn't do it just once. I've been like his moon for a long time" (686-687)

As previously stated, it is evident that dysfunctional family dynamics and traumatic past experiences are the primary contributing factors to self-injury. Memories of past experiences elicit negative emotions, which are then redirected through the act of self-harm. As posited by Smith et al. (2014), self-harm can be understood as a coping mechanism employed in response to traumatic experiences, enabling individuals to disengage from distressing thoughts, memories, and emotions.

The Cognitive Process

An individual who engages in self-injury as a result of their perceived inability to overcome the challenges they face in life demonstrates an internal cognitive process. An individual may perceive themselves as ineffective and incapable of overcoming the challenges they face due to a history of repeated setbacks (Sarafino & Smith, 2012). The subjects in this study exhibited an internal cognitive process. The three subjects in this study believed that their attempts to address the issue had not yielded the desired outcomes, leading to a decline in their motivation to take any further action. The subject's self-perception is negatively affected by his inability to cope with the challenges he faces, many of which are affecting family members or colleagues in the workplace.

"Iya kak, saya merasa tidak berguna" (622) (Indonesian)

"Yes, sis, I feel useless" (622)

"Mungkin kalo hal-hal buruk itu yang terjadi sama aku itu, mungkin ada hal-hal yang nggak bisa aku lakukan atau orang sekitar aku atau keluarga aku sendiri, sedang kesulitan. Aku nggak bisa ngapa-ngapain. Aku kecewa. Dan misalkan kayak ada masalah keluarga."(438-439) (Indonesian)

"Maybe if bad things happen to me, maybe there are things that I can't do or people around me or my own family, are having difficulties. I can't do anything. I'm disappointed. And let's say like there's a family problem." (438-439)

"Iya kak. Aku ingat masa lalu. Aku ngerasa aku ni nggak ada gunanya kak untuk hidup. Yang ada aku nyusahin orang tua aku aja kak. Mental aku hancur banget gara-gara kejadian itu." (634-635) (Indonesian)

"Yes, sis. I remember the past. I feel like there's no point in living. I'm only bothering my parents. I was mentally destroyed because of that incident." (634-635)

Furthermore, an individual who engages in self-injury as a result of persistent difficulties in problem-solving exhibits a global cognitive process. A global cognitive process is a thought that problems will persist and efforts will fail (Sarafino & Smith, 2012). The three subjects in this study believed that the problems they experienced would continue, and thus saw no need to make efforts to overcome them. Self-injury was used as a means of expressing the emotions associated with the problems.

"Iya. Pas nge cutting, masalah tu, beres, walaupun hari esoknya, apa yang besoknya terjadi. Yang penting saat itu, sudah." (133-135) (Indonesian)

"Yes. When I cut, the problem is solved, even though the next day, what happens the next day. The important thing is at that moment, it's done." (133-135)

"Iya, jadi terus berulang. Jadi buat peringatan, peringatan untuk diri sendiri." (281) (Indonesian)

"Yes, so it keeps repeating. So it's a warning, a warning to yourself." (281)

"Biasanya ya, keluarga aku lebih orang tua itu kayak ribut gitu, aku nggak ikut campur. Nilai juga waktu itu, aku udah usaha hasilnya nihil. Hubungan ku juga renggang. Terus akhirnya hubungannya juga hancur. Satu paket gitu." (519-521) (Indonesian)

"Usually, my family, especially my parents, is like a fuss, I don't interfere. The value was also at that time, I tried everything to no avail. My relationship is also tenuous. Then finally the relationship was also destroyed. One package like that." (519-521)

"Kalo saya kepikiran tentang itu, saya jadinya menyakiti diri" (817) (Indonesian)

"If I think about it, I end up hurting myself" (817)

One of the subjects in this study exhibited an external thought process. An external thought process is defined as a cognitive phenomenon whereby an individual attributes stress or problematic experiences to external factors (Sarafino & Smith, 2012). The subject attributed the problem to his partner's actions. The attempt to discuss the subject's dislike of his partner was unsuccessful in achieving the desired outcome. The subject's partner failed to fulfill their commitment and retained the initial items, eliciting feelings of distress and frustration. The subject subsequently expressed these emotions through self-injury.

"Sebenarnya permasalahannya sepele sih, kayak kalau malam ini kita sudah janji tiba-tiba dia kayak ketiduran atau tiba tiba, ehh... dia gak bisa, itu bisa nyakitin diri sendiri. Karena masalahnya sepele." (823-825) (Indonesian)

"Actually, the problem is trivial, like if tonight we have an appointment suddenly he falls asleep or suddenly, he can't, it can hurt yourself. Because the problem is trivial." (823-825)

Learned Helplessness

The phenomenon of learned helplessness can be defined as a psychological state in which an individual exhibits a lack of motivation and an inability to respond effectively to external stimuli. This state can be the result of traumatic experiences, which are defined as aversive experiences that can have a long-term impact on an individual's psychological well-being. Such experiences can manifest in various ways, including through excessive behavior or stress during turbulent adolescence. The subjects' traumatic experiences included parental divorce, punitive measures for misbehavior, victimization by bullies, and even instances of sexual assault. Three subjects were also in their teenage years, a period during which Anggadewi's (2020) research revealed that past trauma has an impact on the inability to control oneself, barriers in relating to family, and negative emotions that quickly emerge. In this case, it is evident that the subjects experience negative emotions that manifest rapidly, including feelings of guilt, unreliability, and a tendency to yield to external circumstances, which collectively impede their capacity to regulate their own behavior and prevent self-harm.

The traumatic experience has been ongoing for an extended period, and despite attempts to resolve the issues, the subject has been unsuccessful. Repeatedly failing to overcome adversity despite various efforts gives rise to learned helplessness. Consequently, Diener & Dweck (1980) posited that an individual experiencing learned helplessness is unable to resolve problems.

"Aku nggak bisa ngapa-ngapain. Aku kecewa" (438-439) (Indonesian)

"I can't do anything. I'm disappointed" (438-439)

"Iya kak, saya merasa tidak berguna. Ya... Aku nggak ada minat apapun kak. Aku juga nggak ada bakat apa-apa. Tujuan hidup aja aku nggak tau apa" (638-639) (Indonesian)

"Yes sis, I feel useless. Yes... I don't have any interests sis. I don't have any talent either. I don't even know what my purpose in life is" (638-639)

"Aku ngerasa aku ni nggak ada gunanya kak untuk hidup. Yang ada aku nyusahin orang tua aku aja kak. Mental aku hancur banget gara-gara kejadian itu" (634-635) (Indonesian)

"I feel like there's no point in living. I'm only bothering my parents. I was mentally destroyed because of that incident" (634-635)

Consequently, the subject employs non-adaptive methods as a means of expressing the disappointment associated with self-harm. The subject's self-harm behavior indirectly indicates a reduction in motivation to either leave or confront problems (Ananda & Hamidah, 2019). From an emotional standpoint, the act of self-harm provides a sense of calm and satisfaction for the subject, as they perceive that the negative emotions they are experiencing are being redirected into physical pain (Guntur et al., 2021). From a cognitive perspective, there is an internal-external process, namely a sense of failure originating from within the subject and a perception of being unable to cope with the stressful situation (Maier & Seligman, 1976). This indicates the presence of a cognitive distortion in the subject, as evidenced by the findings of Mohammad et al. (2021), which demonstrated a positive correlation between cognitive distortions and life events, as well as self-defeating behaviors.

"Iya, nah. Kayak gitu kak. Ngerasa kesalahannya itu terbayarkan dengan aku self injury" (65-66) (Indonesian)

"Yes. Like that, sis. I feel that his mistake was paid for by my self injury" (65-66).

"Kalo di menit2 pertama ada rasa puas karena aku ngerasa aku sudah ngehukum diri aku. Setelah 15-30 menit, udah selow gitu. Aku udah tenang gitu kak. Apalagi pas lihat darahnya" (68-69) (Indonesian)

"In the first few minutes there is a sense of satisfaction because I feel like I've punished myself. After 15-30 minutes, it's cool. I'm already calm. Especially when I see the blood" (68-69)

In light of the aforementioned explanation, it can be posited that the four subjects under examination exhibit a sense of helplessness in regard to the challenges they face in their lives. The unfavorable events that have befallen these individuals are perceived as unavoidable, and they appear to require assistance in order to identify effective coping mechanisms and solutions to their difficulties. It can be hypothesized that the act of self-harm serves as a means of redirecting negative emotions, thereby providing a form of catharsis that alleviates the pervasive sense of helplessness.

CONCLUSION

Helplessness is a learned phenomenon that can be attributed to two primary factors: traumatic experiences, particularly those encountered during childhood, and hostile experiences such as parental divorce, physical and mental violence, and disharmony within the family. These experiences often give rise to unhealthy communication patterns and sexual violence without family support, which collectively contribute to a sense of powerlessness. Low self-efficacy in dealing with various problems in life gives rise to ineffective responses that affect motivation to respond appropriately. Failure to resolve problems that recur leads to the formation of a pattern of failure in the subject's mind. Furthermore, the belief that the problem resulted from a personal mistake and that it will persist for an extended period also contributes to feelings of helplessness. Ultimately, this leads to the persistence of self-injurious behavior, which can be viewed as an ineffective response or a manifestation of helplessness.

Individuals who engage in self-injury may come to recognize that such behaviors will have an adverse effect on their well-being. Individuals are recommended to identify and engage in more positive emotional outlets, such as participation in various hobbies or activities that align with their interests and preferences. Furthermore, it is recommended that parents or other significant individuals in the subject's life adopt a more caring and supportive approach, with the aim of reducing the incidence of self-injury. It is also hoped that future researchers will contribute to the existing body of knowledge on learned helplessness in individuals who engage in self-injury, either through a review of existing literature or through the conduct of interviews. Additionally, it is hoped that future researchers will expand the number of participants engaged in research related to helplessness and self-injury.

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