

The Elephant and the String

A fully grown elephant would probably be an animal that few would associate with a state of powerlessness. As well as being physically powerful, elephants are clever and resourceful animals; their intelligence is comparable with that of chimpanzees and dolphins.

But it is said that in some parts of the world, if you look a little closer, you will notice that these powerful beasts are restrained not by the strong chains you'd expect to see. Instead, they are tied by thin ropes that would be mere strings compared to the might of the elephant if it resisted them.

One may ask how it can be, that their keepers are able to tether their elephants using simple pieces of thin rope? The answer, to use a human term, is "learned helplessness".

Elephants have long memories, and some trainers are willing to exploit this fact. They will take a baby elephant, and use a heavy chain to tie it to a stake in the ground. Eventually, the baby elephant will stop struggling against the chain. It will learn that no matter how long it tries to escape from its shackles, it won't break free from them.

It is at this point that the trainers are able to replace the chain tied around its leg with a piece of rope. The elephant has learned that it is helpless, even though it would now easily break its restraints and wander free if it were to challenge the boundaries it has been set.

And so, the end result is a fully grown elephant being "restrained" by a piece of rope whose real strength lies in the elephant's mind. At that tell-tale tightening when the rope becomes taut, it gives up.

Learned helplessness.

Sadly, the experience of having a mental illness can often be like having one of these ropes tied around your ankle. Of course, we were not intentionally chained to a stake in the ground in the same way as the elephant. The stake is not literal in our case, but representative of a point and time in our lives that we must move on from.



We usually enter the mental health system during a time of crisis, when our resilience and ability to cope with the pressures of life are at their lowest. We are given treatment and medication to help address the most distressing symptoms of our illness, and then what happens?

For many the reality is that we are put on a benefit, and forgotten about. There is no expectation or encouragement to recover or progress from our situation in life; all that is required is the signature of a doctor on a medical certificate, and we are left to subsist on a meagre amount of money for another year.

Granted, when we first enter the mental health system, we may be in a weakened state. We may need extra support to help us function in our day-to-day lives. Our condition may be comparable with a heavy chain that keeps us immobilised, tethered in one spot.

But the reality is, over time we grow and heal. What many people perceive as a weakness, an illness, can in fact make us stronger in the long run.

Through surviving challenging times that many people do not have the chance to face, we can gain great depth of character and emotional resilience.

Imagine if you broke your leg. You'd be wearing a cast until the fractured bone healed, and possibly walking with the assistance of crutches. The expectation would be that eventually the cast would be removed, you'd put the crutches aside, and then you'd be able to walk and run again without support.

Mental illness is treated very differently to physical illness. Many of us are put on medications and entered into the welfare system – given the equivalent of a cast and crutches to help address our immediate situation – and then left to fend for ourselves. There seems to be no expectation that we will return to work, and contribute to society again.

We grow and heal as individuals, but all too often we are not encouraged to test our new capabilities. It may take months, or years, but eventually there will come a time when we have recovered enough to redefine our boundaries – and yet we may not realise it.

The limiting effect of mental illness in our lives, may in reality be in our imagination. We owe it to ourselves to test our boundaries, and try to exceed them.

The question must be asked, how many of us are restrained in the same way as the elephant in this story? How many of us have tried and failed to do something in the past, and given up on the idea?

Why not try again; push through the envelope of discomfort? You might surprise yourself, almost as much as the elephant would surprise its own keepers if it were to do the same...

"Whether you think you can, or think you can't, you're right." - Henry Ford

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