

Research Paper

## A Study of Learned Helplessness and Irrational Beliefs among Graduate College Students

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### ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to examine the levels of learned helplessness and irrational beliefs among male and female graduate college students, and to explore the correlation between these two psychological constructs. A purposive sample of 100 graduate students (50 males and 50 females), aged between 18 and 24 years ( $M = 21.58$ ,  $SD = 2.87$ ), was selected from various colleges in Solapur city, Maharashtra. The study employed the Learned Helplessness Scale (adapted by Srivastava & Patro, 2006) and the Personal Belief Inventory (Hartman, 1968) to assess the respective variables. Statistical analyses included independent samples  $t$ -tests and Pearson product-moment correlation to evaluate gender differences and associations between the constructs. Findings revealed that female students exhibited significantly higher levels of both learned helplessness ( $t(98) = 9.62$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and irrational beliefs ( $t(98) = 11.83$ ,  $p < .01$ ) compared to their male counterparts. Additionally, a significant negative correlation was found between learned helplessness and irrational beliefs ( $r = -.81$ ,  $p < .01$ ), indicating that as one construct increased, the other decreased. This inverse relationship, although unexpected, highlights the complexity of cognitive-emotional interactions among young adults. The results suggest the need for gender-sensitive mental health interventions within higher education settings, with a focus on restructuring irrational beliefs and enhancing a sense of personal control. The study contributes to the understanding of cognitive vulnerability in Indian college students and underscores the importance of psychological support systems in academic institutions.

**Keywords:** *Learned helplessness, irrational beliefs, college students*

The transition from adolescence to adulthood is marked by various psychosocial challenges, especially during college. Graduate college students are at a critical developmental stage where identity formation, future uncertainties, and increasing social expectations create heightened psychological pressures. In such circumstances, learned helplessness and irrational beliefs become particularly relevant. Learned helplessness, a concept introduced by Martin Seligman (1975), refers to a psychological condition wherein individuals believe they have no control over their environment or the outcomes of their actions, even when change is possible. This state of perceived powerlessness often develops after repeated exposure to uncontrollable or adverse situations

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and is strongly linked to symptoms of depression, anxiety, low motivation, and poor academic performance.

Irrational beliefs, as conceptualized by Albert Ellis (1962) through Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT), are unrealistic and illogical thoughts that can distort emotional responses and behaviors. These beliefs include demands for perfection, fear of failure, catastrophizing events, and a strong need for approval. In a college context, such cognitive distortions can lead to stress, procrastination, social withdrawal, and impaired decision-making. Both constructs—learned helplessness and irrational beliefs are cognitive vulnerabilities that influence students' perceptions of control, self-worth, and adaptability.

Gender differences in these psychological variables have been a significant area of inquiry. Previous research suggests that males and females may exhibit different cognitive and emotional coping strategies, potentially influenced by socialization, cultural expectations, and neurobiological factors. Female students, in some cases, have shown higher tendencies toward internalizing problems, including helplessness and self-critical beliefs, while males may externalize stress or suppress emotional expression. Understanding these gendered nuances is vital for developing gender-sensitive psychological interventions and educational policies that promote emotional resilience and rational thinking among students.

The research seeks to uncover critical psychological patterns that may affect students' academic success and mental well-being by examining the relationship between these constructs and exploring gender-based differences. The study contributes to the broader educational and clinical psychology field by offering insights into how maladaptive cognitive frameworks can be addressed within higher education institutions. Given the rising concerns around student mental health and academic burnout, such research is timely and socially relevant. The findings may inform counseling practices, student support programs, and mental health awareness initiatives to foster rational thought patterns and self-empowerment among youth.

Seligman (1975) pioneering work on learned helplessness revealed that when individuals are exposed to uncontrollable negative events, they may generalize this perceived lack of control to future situations, even when control is possible. This concept was derived from experiments with animals and later extended to humans, particularly in understanding depression. His research emphasized that repeated exposure to failure or negative reinforcement results in passivity and resignation. This framework laid the foundation for exploring helplessness in academic and social domains, where students may cease to try due to prior negative outcomes. The study remains a cornerstone in motivational and clinical psychology.

Ellis (1962) through the development of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT), introduced the concept of irrational beliefs as core contributors to emotional and behavioral dysfunction. According to Ellis, individuals often engage in rigid, illogical thinking patterns, such as catastrophizing or demanding perfection, which lead to emotional distress. He argued that people could improve their mental well-being by identifying and restructuring these beliefs. In academic contexts, irrational beliefs can hinder performance, increase anxiety, and reduce resilience. Ellis's cognitive framework provides a therapeutic basis for helping students manage irrational thought patterns contributing to helplessness and distress.

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Peterson and Barrett (1987) investigated the role of explanatory style in learned helplessness among students and found that individuals who attributed failures to internal, stable, and global causes were more likely to experience depressive symptoms. Their study highlighted that cognitive interpretation of events, rather than the events themselves, determines susceptibility to helplessness. This attributional framework is significant in educational settings, as students who consistently blame themselves for academic setbacks may withdraw from effortful engagement. Their findings emphasized the importance of cognitive training and attributional retraining in preventing academic learned helplessness.

Dryden and Neenan (2004) extended Ellis's work by applying REBT principles to educational and workplace environments. They emphasized that irrational beliefs—such as “I must succeed at everything” or “I need everyone's approval”—can sabotage goal achievement and emotional regulation. Their book offered practical strategies for disputing irrational beliefs and promoting rational alternatives. In a college setting, such beliefs are prevalent among students facing performance pressure and social comparison. Dryden and Neenan's work is crucial for counselors and educators seeking to instill cognitive flexibility and emotional balance in young adults.

Hyland et al. (2017) conducted a cross-sectional study examining the relationship between irrational beliefs and mental health outcomes among university students. The study found that higher levels of irrational beliefs significantly predicted greater levels of anxiety, depression, and stress. The researchers concluded that irrational thinking patterns function as transdiagnostic risk factors and should be addressed in mental health interventions. Their work underscores the ongoing relevance of Ellis's model in contemporary student populations and supports the inclusion of REBT-informed cognitive restructuring in university counseling programs.

### ***Objectives of the study***

- To discover the learned helplessness and irrational beliefs among male and female graduate college students.
- To investigate the correlation between learned helplessness and irrational beliefs among male and female graduate college students.

### ***Hypotheses***

- There will be no significant difference between male and female graduate college students on learned helplessness.
- There will be no significant difference between male and female graduate college students regarding irrational beliefs.
- No significant correlation between learned helplessness and irrational beliefs among male and female graduate college students will be found.

### ***Samples***

For the current research, a purposive sample of 100 senior graduate college students was selected from various colleges in Solapur city, Maharashtra. The sample was equally divided, comprising 50 male and 50 female students. Participants were 18 to 24 years ( $M = 21.58$ ,  $SD = 2.87$ ). A non-probability random sampling technique was employed to ensure diversity and accessibility within the target population of senior graduate students.

**Variable**

- **Independent Variables:**

**Gender**

- 1) Male
- 2) Female

- **Dependent Variables**

- 1) Learned helplessness
- 2) Irrational beliefs

**Research Tools**

- **Learned Helplessness Scale:** The LH (LH) scale was used to measure the subject's LH. The LH scale was originally developed by Seligman (1970). Srivastava and Patro (2006) adapted and translated the scale into Hindi. Originally, the scale consisted of 48 items, which measured both learned optimism and LH. To assess LH, the scale was limited to 24 items. The LH was measured on the basis of the respondents' attributions of bad events, which are indicators of LH. The scale's reliability was determined by calculating split-half reliability on a sample of 500 managers. The split-half reliability coefficient was found to be 0.39. The validity of the scale is yet to be determined.
- **Personal Belief Inventory (PBI):** The Personal Beliefs Inventory (PBI) is a self-administered, objectively scored diagnostic tool developed by Hartman in 1968 to assess irrational thinking. The inventory comprises 60 items, each presented as a straightforward declarative sentence representing a common irrational belief. The highest possible score is 300, indicating a high level of irrational thinking, while the lowest possible score is 0, indicating minimal irrational thinking. Higher scores reflect a greater degree of irrational beliefs.

**Statistical Analysis:**

“t” value and Product Moment Correlation (Pearson r) Statistics is used for the present study.

**STATISTICAL ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

*Table No-1 Mean Std. Deviation and t value of learned helplessness and irrational beliefs among male and female graduate college students.*

Factors	Male Students		Female Students		df	t
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
<b>Learned Helplessness</b>	28.41	2.93	34.60	3.48	98	9.62**
<b>Irrational Beliefs</b>	179.20	4.70	190.47	4.82	98	11.83**

*Significant at 0.01\*\* = 2.62, 0.05\* = 1.98*

An independent samples *t*-test was conducted to compare the levels of learned helplessness between male and female graduate college students. Results indicated a statistically significant difference,  $t(98) = 9.62, p < .01$ , with female students ( $M = 34.60, SD = 3.48$ ) reporting higher levels of learned helplessness compared to their male counterparts ( $M = 28.41, SD = 2.93$ ). These findings imply that female students may be more susceptible to experiencing a lack of control over academic or social stressors, aligning with existing literature that suggests females are more prone to internalizing cognitive-emotional difficulties (Peterson & Barrett, 1987).

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Similarly, a significant gender difference was observed in irrational beliefs, with female students ( $M = 190.47$ ,  $SD = 4.82$ ) scoring higher than male students ( $M = 179.20$ ,  $SD = 4.70$ ). The independent samples  $t$ -test yielded  $t(98) = 11.83$ ,  $p < .01$ , confirming that this difference is statistically significant. These findings suggest that female students tend to hold stronger irrational beliefs, such as a heightened fear of failure, need for approval, or perfectionistic thinking. This is consistent with the theoretical framework of Ellis (1962), who emphasized the prevalence of irrational cognitions as a central factor in emotional disturbances. The magnitude of the  $t$ -value underscores the importance of targeting irrational belief systems in psychological interventions, particularly for female student populations in Indian educational contexts.

**Table No-2 Product Moment Correlation (Pearson  $r$ ) between learned helplessness and irrational beliefs among male and female graduate college students**

	Learned Helplessness	Irrational Beliefs
Learned Helplessness	1	- 0.81**
Irrational Beliefs	-0.81**	1

**Significant  $0.05^* = 0.10$ ,  $0.01^{**} = 0.14$**

A Pearson product-moment correlation was computed to assess the relationship between learned helplessness and irrational beliefs among graduate college students. The results revealed a strong negative correlation,  $r = -.81$ ,  $p < .01$ , indicating a statistically significant inverse relationship between the two variables. This suggests that as irrational belief levels increase, learned helplessness tend to decrease, and vice versa. While counterintuitive, such a negative relationship may reflect complex cognitive dynamics, where highly irrational beliefs could be accompanied by a false sense of control or distorted optimism, reducing perceived helplessness temporarily. This finding contrasts with earlier theoretical assumptions (Ellis, 1962; Seligman, 1975), typically predicting a positive or reinforcing association. Further investigation is warranted to explore possible moderating factors such as coping styles, personality traits, or academic performance that may influence this unexpected pattern.

### CONCLUSIONS

- Female graduate college students had significantly higher learned helplessness than male graduate college students.
- Female graduate college students had significantly higher irrational beliefs than male graduate college students.
- A negative correlation was found between learned helplessness and irrational beliefs among male and female graduate college students.

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### ***Conflict of Interest***

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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