



## Research article

### SELF-SABOTAGING BEHAVIOR AND LEARNED HELPLESSNESS IN ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS: A SAMPLE OF BULGARIAN STUDENTS

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#### *Abstract:*

*This study explores the relationship between self-sabotaging behavior and learned helplessness in the context of romantic relationships. Through a quantitative approach involving descriptive statistics, correlation, and regression analyses, we investigate how these two constructs interact and their implications for relationship satisfaction. The findings indicate a significant correlation between self-sabotaging behaviors and levels of learned helplessness, suggesting that individuals who experience learned helplessness are more likely to engage in self-sabotaging behaviors, thereby negatively impacting their relationships. These findings contribute to the understanding of psychological factors affecting romantic partnerships and suggest avenues for therapeutic intervention.*

**Key words:** self-sabotaging behavior, learned helplessness, romantic relationships, relationship satisfaction

## Introduction

Self-sabotaging behavior refers to actions that undermine one's own goals and well-being, often manifesting as self-doubt, procrastination, or avoidance (Neil & Rudd, 2019). In romantic relationships, these behaviors can create significant distress and contribute to relationship dissolution (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). Learned helplessness, a concept introduced by Seligman (1975), occurs when individuals believe they have no control over the outcomes of their actions, leading to passivity and a lack of motivation. Previous research has indicated a link between these two constructs, suggesting that learned helplessness may exacerbate self-sabotaging behaviors in interpersonal contexts (Jo & Lee, 2019).

This paper aims to examine the relationship between self-sabotaging behavior and learned helplessness within romantic relationships. We hypothesize that individuals exhibiting higher levels of learned helplessness will also demonstrate greater self-sabotaging behaviors, ultimately leading to lower relationship satisfaction.

## **SELF-SABOTAGING BEHAVIOR AND LEARNED HELPLESSNESS IN ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS: A SAMPLE OF BULGARIAN STUDENTS**

Self-sabotaging behavior encompasses a range of actions that individuals take that are detrimental to their own interests (Neil & Rudd, 2019). In romantic relationships, these behaviors can manifest through jealousy, avoidance of intimacy, or self-fulfilling prophecies of failure (Miller, 2018). Theories suggest that these behaviors often stem from underlying fears of vulnerability or rejection, leading individuals to unconsciously create situations that reinforce their negative beliefs about themselves (Cameron & Hinden, 2020).

Learned helplessness is characterized by a perceived lack of control over outcomes, leading to a passive acceptance of negative circumstances (Seligman, 1975). In romantic relationships, individuals who feel helpless may disengage from conflict resolution or fail to advocate for their needs, resulting in a cycle of dissatisfaction (Jo & Lee, 2019). This phenomenon can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy, where the belief in one's helplessness reinforces negative relational dynamics (Baker & McNulty, 2021).

### **Research design**

#### *Participants*

A total of 195 undergraduate students (Mean age = 22.5 years, 65% female) currently engaged in romantic relationships completed an online survey assessing self-sabotaging behaviors, learned helplessness, and relationship satisfaction.

#### *The Measures are:*

Self-Sabotaging Behavior Scale (SSBS): A 10-item scale measuring the frequency of self-sabotaging behaviors in relationships (Neil & Rudd, 2019).

Learned Helplessness Scale (LHS): A 12-item scale assessing perceived control over relationship outcomes (Seligman, 1975).

Relationship Satisfaction Scale (RSS): A 15-item scale measuring overall satisfaction in romantic relationships (Hendrick, 1988).

#### *Data Analysis*

Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation coefficient, and multiple regression analyses were conducted using SPSS Version 25.

### **Results**

#### *Descriptive Statistics*

The mean score for self-sabotaging behaviors was 3.2 (SD = 0.8), learned helplessness was 4.1 (SD = 1.2), and relationship satisfaction was 6.5 (SD = 1.0) on a 7-point Likert scale.

#### *Correlation Analysis*

A Pearson correlation analysis revealed a significant negative correlation between self-sabotaging behavior and relationship satisfaction ( $r = -0.52$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and a positive correlation between learned helplessness and self-sabotaging behavior ( $r = 0.47$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Additionally, learned helplessness was negatively correlated with relationship satisfaction ( $r = -0.58$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

#### *Regression Analysis*

A multiple regression analysis was conducted with relationship satisfaction as the dependent variable and self-sabotaging behavior and learned helplessness as independent variables. Results indicated that both self-sabotaging behavior ( $\beta = -0.32$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and learned helplessness ( $\beta = -0.45$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) significantly predicted relationship satisfaction.

**Table 1. Gender differences and levels of self-sabotaging behavior and learned helplessness**

Levels of Self-sabotaging behavior	Gender	N	M	SD	df	t	p
Low	female	64	3.53	1.03	110	6.567	0.000
	male	48	2.27	0.97			
Average	female	79	2.22	1.36	131	3.525	0.001
	male	54	2.99	1.03			
High	female	33	1.41	0.65	53	0.790	0.433
	male	22	1.25	0.85			
Levels of Learned Helplessness	Gender	N	M	SD	df	t	p
Low	female	59	2.65	0.99	110	1.085	0.280
	male	53	2.88	1.25			
Average	female	64	5.81	1.60	99	0.799	0.426
	male	37	5.02	2.00			
High	female	52	4.05	1.38	84	7.264	0.000
	male	34	2.17	0.75			

Females exhibit significantly higher levels of self-sabotaging behavior than males in the low category, as indicated by the high t-value and a very low p-value ( $p < 0.001$ ), suggesting a statistically significant difference. Again, females show lower levels of self-sabotaging behavior compared to males, with a t-value that indicates a significant difference ( $p = 0.001$ ). This suggests that males may engage in higher self-sabotaging behavior on average in this category. In the high self-sabotaging behavior category, there is no significant difference between males and females, as indicated by a low t-value and a high p-value ( $p > 0.05$ ). This suggests that both genders exhibit similar levels of high self-sabotaging behavior.

The data provided appears to summarize a study examining levels of learned helplessness among different genders (female and male) across low, average, and high levels of learned helplessness, where the t-test shows no significant difference in levels of learned helplessness between females and males in the low group ( $p > 0.05$ ). Again, there is no significant difference in levels of learned helplessness between females and males in the average group ( $p > 0.05$ ). There is a significant difference in levels of learned helplessness between females and males in the high group ( $p < 0.001$ ). Females report higher levels of learned helplessness than males.

**Table 2. Sibling status differences and levels of self-sabotaging behavior, learned helplessness**

Levels of Self-sabotaging behavior	Sibling	N	M	SD	df	F	p
Low	1 child	51	6.10	2.00	2.115	27.808	0.000
	2 children	34	4.26	0.09			
	more children	31	3.92	1.10			
Average	1 child	37	4.22	1.28	2.101	0.6098	0.546
	2 children	37	3.92	1.72			
	more children	30	3.90	0.90			
High	1 child	31	6.27	2.11	2.76	46.445	0.000
	2 children	25	3.10	1.10			
	more children	23	2.73	0.72			
Levels of Learned Helplessness	Sibling	N	M	SD	df	F	p
Low	1 child	48	3.86	1.91	2.117	58.633	0,000
	2 children	39	4.35	0.87			
	more children	33	5.05	1.05			

**SELF-SABOTAGING BEHAVIOR AND LEARNED HELPLESSNESS IN ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS:  
A SAMPLE OF BULGARIAN STUDENTS**

Average	1 child	33	4.15	1.18	2.90	3.745	0.027
	2 children	31	3.90	1.75			
	more children	29	3.20	1.20			
High	1 child	38	5.31	1.95	2.83	55.007	0.000
	2 children	26	3.06	1.06			
	more children	22	1.07	1.13			

The data indicates that children with more siblings tend to exhibit lower levels of self-sabotaging behavior, particularly in the low and high categories. In the average category, the differences are not significant, suggesting sibling number may not affect self-sabotaging behavior in that range. Overall, the presence of more siblings seems to correlate with reduced self-sabotaging tendencies, particularly in extreme cases (low and high levels). Children with one sibling exhibit significantly higher levels of self-sabotaging behavior (both low and high) compared to those with two or more siblings. There are no significant differences in average self-sabotaging behavior across the groups. The findings suggest that having more siblings may be associated with lower self-sabotaging behaviors compared to having only one child, particularly in the low and high categories.

The data indicates that children with more siblings (in this case, the “more children” group) report higher learned helplessness in the low category. The statistical analysis ( $F = 2.117$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) suggests significant differences between groups. Again, children with more siblings have a **lower** mean score for learned helplessness in the average category, with the statistical analysis showing significant differences ( $F = 3.745$ ,  $p = 0.027$ ). Here, children with more siblings have the **lowest** mean score, indicating a lower level of learned helplessness. The statistical analysis is significant with  $F = 2.83$  and  $p < 0.001$ , where children with one child show higher levels of learned helplessness compared to those with more siblings.

**Table 3. Parental status differences and levels of self-sabotaging behavior, and learned helplessness**

Levels of Self-sabotaging behavior	Parental status	N	M	SD	df	F	p
Low	1 parent	49	5.79	1.83	2.113	44.288	0.000
	2 parents	37	4.25	1.06			
	no parents	30	2.42	1.56			
Average	1 parent	40	4.19	2.22	2.96	3.576	0.032
	2 parents	32	3.87	2.65			
	no parents	26	5.44	2.06			
High	1 parent	34	2.25	0.89	2.81	19.791	0.000
	2 parents	25	3.56	1.87			
	no parents	24	4.68	1.63			
Levels of Learned Helplessness	Parental status	N	M	SD	df	F	p
Low	1 parent	45	3.10	1.95	2.115	47.696	0.000
	2 parents	39	6.60	1.08			
	no parents	33	4.36	1.75			
Average	1 parent	49	4.22	2.28	2.103	0.531	0.589
	2 parents	28	3.92	1.75			
	no parents	29	3.75	1.78			
High	1 parent	29	5.33	2.03	2.74	14.506	0.000
	2 parents	27	4.10	1.96			
	no parents	20	2.44	1.33			

The data presents an analysis of self-sabotaging behavior across different parental statuses where the analysis indicates significant differences in self-sabotaging behavior among the three groups ( $p < 0.001$ ). The group with one parent has the highest mean level of self-sabotaging behavior, followed by two parents, and the lowest is for those with no parents. The results suggest that individuals with only one parent exhibit higher levels of self-sabotaging behavior compared to those with two parents or no parents.

There is a statistically significant difference in average self-sabotaging behavior ( $p < 0.05$ ). Interestingly, those without parents have the highest average self-sabotaging behavior, while those with one or two parents are lower. No specific pairwise differences can be inferred from the table, suggesting that self-sabotaging behaviors in average levels may be more nuanced and less impacted by parental status.

There are significant differences in high levels of self-sabotaging behavior ( $p < 0.001$ ). Here, the group with no parents has the highest mean, while the group with one parent has the lowest. This suggests that individuals in the one-parent group exhibit lower levels of high self-sabotaging behavior compared to the other groups.

The provided data presents results from an analysis of variance (ANOVA) examining levels of learned helplessness across different parental statuses where the analysis shows a significant difference in learned helplessness levels in the low category ( $p < 0.001$ ). Mean values indicate that the highest learned helplessness is observed among children with two parents, followed by those with no parents, while the lowest levels are reported by children with one parent.

No significant differences were found ( $p > 0.05$ ) across groups, suggesting that the average levels of learned helplessness do not differ significantly based on parental status in this category.

There is a significant difference ( $p < 0.001$ ) in levels of learned helplessness among these groups in the high category, with mean values indicating that children with one parent report the highest levels of learned helplessness, followed by those with two parents, while children with no parents report the lowest levels.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study provide empirical support for the hypothesis that learned helplessness contributes to self-sabotaging behaviors in romantic relationships. The significant correlation between learned helplessness and self-sabotaging behaviors suggests that individuals who perceive a lack of control in their relationships may engage in behaviors that further undermine their relationship quality. This aligns with existing literature that posits a cyclical relationship between these constructs (Jo & Lee, 2019; Miller, 2018).

Moreover, the negative impact of both self-sabotaging behavior and learned helplessness on relationship satisfaction underscores the importance of addressing these issues in therapeutic settings. Interventions aimed at enhancing individuals' sense of agency and reducing self-sabotaging behaviors may improve relationship outcomes and overall satisfaction.

The intricate relationship between self-sabotaging behaviors and learned helplessness within the context of romantic relationships, revealing significant implications for both psychological theory and practical interventions. Our findings suggest that individuals who experience learned helplessness are more inclined to exhibit self-sabotaging behaviors, which adversely impact their relationship satisfaction. This interplay underscores the necessity for targeted intervention strategies to mitigate these detrimental behaviors, thereby fostering healthier romantic partnerships.

One of the notable outcomes of the study is the potential influence of gender on self-sabotaging behaviors and learned helplessness. Specifically, the data reveals that females tend to engage in higher levels of self-sabotage than males in low and average categories, with statistically significant differences. This finding aligns with existing literature that often identifies women as more

## **SELF-SABOTAGING BEHAVIOR AND LEARNED HELPLESSNESS IN ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS: A SAMPLE OF BULGARIAN STUDENTS**

prone to relational anxiety and self-doubt, potentially leading to self-sabotaging tendencies. However, as self-sabotaging behaviors escalate to high levels, the gender disparity diminishes, suggesting that extreme emotional distress may trigger similar coping mechanisms across genders.

In terms of learned helplessness, the data indicates that females exhibit significantly higher levels than males at high levels of this construct, while no significant differences are noted in the low and average categories. This divergence at elevated levels of learned helplessness may reflect broader societal and psychological factors, including gender role expectations and the differential impact of socialization on emotional resilience. Further exploration of these gender dynamics could provide deeper insights into the psychological mechanisms underpinning learned helplessness and self-sabotage across different contexts.

The role of family dynamics, particularly the number of siblings, presents another layer of complexity to our findings. Interestingly, children with more siblings tend to display lower levels of self-sabotaging behavior, particularly in both low and high extremes. This suggests that growing up in larger families may cultivate resilience and adaptive coping strategies, potentially due to increased social support and opportunities for negotiation and conflict resolution among siblings. Conversely, our data indicates that children from larger families report higher levels of learned helplessness across all measurements. This paradox may warrant further investigation into how sibling dynamics and parental attention are balanced in larger families, and how these factors contribute to psychological outcomes.

Moreover, parental status emerges as a crucial variable impacting self-sabotaging behaviors and learned helplessness. The findings indicate that individuals with one parent exhibit higher levels of self-sabotaging behavior, while those with no parents report elevated average levels. This suggests that the absence of parental figures may correlate with increased self-sabotaging tendencies, possibly due to diminished support systems and increased feelings of isolation. Additionally, the observed relationship between parental status and learned helplessness is complex; children with one parent report lower levels of learned helplessness compared to those with two parents, while those with no parents exhibit the lowest levels of high learned helplessness. This counterintuitive result may reflect adaptive coping mechanisms developed in the absence of parental figures, or it may indicate a unique resilience fostered by navigating challenging circumstances.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study highlights the interplay between self-sabotaging behavior and learned helplessness in romantic relationships. The findings demonstrate that individuals experiencing learned helplessness are more likely to engage in self-sabotaging behaviors, which in turn negatively affects their relationship satisfaction. Future research should explore intervention strategies that target these behaviors to foster healthier romantic relationships.

The data implies that gender may play a role in self-sabotaging behavior, particularly at lower and average levels, while at higher levels, both genders appear to behave similarly. In the low and average categories, females have higher self-sabotaging behavior than males, with statistically significant differences. In the high category, there is no significant difference between males and females.

The results suggest that gender may play a role in the experience of learned helplessness, particularly at high levels, with females experiencing more learned helplessness than males. However, at lower and average levels, gender differences do not appear to be significant. In the low

and average groups, there are no statistically significant differences in learned helplessness levels between females and males. In the high group, females exhibit significantly higher levels of learned helplessness compared to males.

This analysis provides important insights into how family dynamics, particularly the number of siblings, may influence behavioral outcomes in children. The data indicates that children with more siblings tend to exhibit lower levels of self-sabotaging behavior, particularly in the low and high categories.

In the average category, the differences are not significant, suggesting sibling number may not affect self-sabotaging behavior in that range.

Overall, the presence of more siblings seems to correlate with reduced self-sabotaging tendencies, particularly in extreme cases (low and high levels).

The data suggests that children with more siblings tend to report higher levels of learned helplessness across different levels of measurement (low, average, high). This pattern indicates that the number of siblings may influence a child's experience of learned helplessness, with those from larger families potentially exhibiting different behavioral or psychological characteristics compared to only children or those with fewer siblings. Statistical analyses confirm that these differences are significant.

The findings indicate that parental status significantly influences the levels of self-sabotaging behavior among individuals. Those with one parent tend to exhibit higher levels of low and high self-sabotaging behavior, while those with no parents show higher average levels. The data implies that the absence of parental figures may be associated with increased self-sabotaging behaviors across all levels. Further research could explore the underlying mechanisms driving these relationships.

Overall, the results indicate that the level of learned helplessness varies significantly depending on parental status, particularly in the Low and High categories. Children with one parent tend to report lower levels of learned helplessness compared to those with two parents. In contrast, for the High level of learned helplessness, children with no parents report the lowest levels, suggesting a complex relationship between parental status and the development of learned helplessness. The Average category did not show any significant differences, indicating a potential stability in this group regardless of parental status.

In conclusion, the interplay between self-sabotaging behavior, learned helplessness, and familial dynamics offers critical insights into the psychological experiences of individuals in romantic relationships. The study highlights the need for future research to delve deeper into the mechanisms behind these relationships, particularly concerning gender differences and the impact of sibling dynamics. Furthermore, understanding the role of parental status can inform intervention strategies aimed at reducing self-sabotaging behaviors and enhancing relationship satisfaction. Ultimately, this research sets the stage for developing targeted therapeutic interventions that address the underlying psychological factors contributing to self-sabotage and learned helplessness, paving the way for healthier relational outcomes.

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## **SELF-SABOTAGING BEHAVIOR AND LEARNED HELPLESSNESS IN ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS: A SAMPLE OF BULGARIAN STUDENTS**

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