

Nurturing Hope

“Nothing is hopeless, we must hope for everything.”
—Euripides, Greek scholar and playwright

How do we pick ourselves up from the ashes of trauma and tragedy? How do we get through the everyday disappointments and setbacks of life? Hope gives us a reason to go on. First, we need to believe that life will get better, and then we need to nurture a vision of how to make it better. Hope gives us the strength necessary to keep moving in a positive direction, in other words, to persevere.

Hope, in many ways, is more of a feeling than an intellectual effort. In fact, the absence of hope is the deadly emotion despair, which in turn is connected to depression. Since the beginning of recorded time, people have recognized the important role hope plays in survival. Remember the myth of Pandora’s box? The overly curious Pandora opens a forbidden box, thereby releasing a host of evils into the world. But one thing was left in the box, and that was hope. The moral of the story—all is not lost as long as there is hope.

Hope and success

Hope also plays a key role in achievement. A number of studies have shown that having “high hopes” can help people succeed in many areas of life—school, work, family and sports. In fact, studies have shown that the ability to have and sustain hope plays a bigger role in success than natural talent. Hopeful people have also been linked to better physical, mental and emotional health. There’s also a strong connection between hope and surviving and recovering from a serious illness or injury.

Nature vs. nurture

The jury is out on whether people are predisposed from birth to be positive or negative thinkers, hopeful or hopeless in their outlook. It’s true that how you were raised can affect your ability to ignite and maintain a sense of hope. That said, however, there are ways to nurture the spirit of hope within yourself. For example, if you consciously think positive thoughts and block out negative self-talk, you can start to create a space for hope to grow. According to C.R. Snyder, a psychologist who has studied and written about hope, to have hope is to have both a *plan* for the future and a *will* to carry it out.

But if you’re not naturally a positive thinker, don’t give up hope. You can build hope as you would any other habit.

- Set goals and draw up a plan to achieve them.
- Envision the future you want. Dream big but have a realistic plan of action to get there.
- Develop skills and talents that help you pursue your goals.
- Be creative when thinking of ways to overcome obstacles.
- Counter negative self-talk.
- Read inspiring stories of others who have achieved or who have overcome setbacks.
- Be grateful for and celebrate the small pleasures and achievements of life.
- Avoid negative—stories, news, people, movies—things that lead to feelings of despair.
- Don’t rush hope. Feeling bad after a terrible experience is natural and necessary. Have faith that hope will return if given room and time to expand.

“False” hope

Sometimes the word “hope” is confused with fantasies or having “false” or “blind” hopes. False hopes are associated with wishful thinking, in which people sit around “hoping” for miracles instead of taking steps to make things happen. True hope gives you the strength and energy to persevere in your quest; it ignites the fire that gets you moving, acting, growing and living.

To get started building your “hope” capacity, first see where you need to improve. You can test your hope levels at C.R. Snyder’s hope scale: www.psych.ku.edu/faculty/rsnyder/state.htm

Sources: *The Anatomy of Hope: How People Prevail in the Face of Illness* by Jerome Groopman. Random House, 2003; *Making Hope Happen: A Workbook for Turning Possibilities into Reality* by Diane McDermott, C.R. Snyder. New Harbinger, 1999; *The Psychology of Hope: You Can Get Here from There* by C.R. Snyder. Free Press, 1994.

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