



Hope: A Vital Health Resource

By Lilly Anderson, MPH, DAFH Director, August 30, 2021

Hope is a key concept in most world religions. Many believe hope to be a gift from God, something we can hold onto when we are feeling distressed. Hope offers confidence in the face of doubt and can provide endurance and patience when we are tempted to quit.

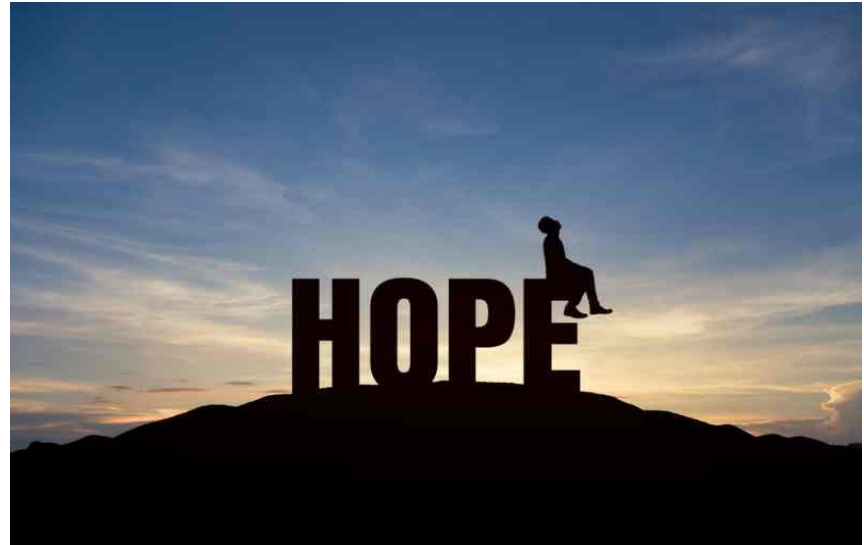
Hope is cultivated when we have a goal in mind, determination to meet that goal and a plan to reach it. According to many physicians, hope can be the power that prevails. It is more complex and controversial than can be imagined.

The power of hope lies in its ability to shape the patients' perception of their world and their actions.

"Hope is the only bee that makes honey without flowers." Robert Green Ingersoll

"You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one. I hope someday you'll join us. And the world will live as one." John Lennon

"May your choices reflect your hopes, not your fears." Nelson Mandela



I intended to write my first column to you about depression and how we can best keep it at bay. Frankly, I'm worried about morale. It's been a very hard fall and winter for many, but after some reflection I decided we have all lived with depression for too long now. Instead let's talk about hope. When daily life seems uncertain and insurmountable, hope is one psychological factor that can help us immensely. What's more, hope doesn't relate to IQ, income or beauty. It's an equal opportunity resource.

Hope is defined as a feeling of expectation and desire for a certain thing to happen. It is a factor that exists both in the present moment, and as a part of your temperament and mindset. Hope is not the same as positivity, and while hopeful thinking relies on positivity, it's not simply blind optimism. Hope is more complex and relies on being structured around goals. Specifically, hope has three components: (1) goals-what

we choose to focus our efforts and attention on; (2) agency-our ability to shape our lives; and (3) pathways-how we use that ability to get where we get (Weir, 2013).

The interactions between physical and mental health are well documented, and hope is associated with many positive life outcomes: greater happiness, better academic and athletic performance, and lower risk of death. According to numerous studies, higher levels of hope have been associated with protection against chronic disease and better pain management (Bonior, 2020). Hope is reportedly good for cardiac health by reducing the risk for heart attack and it also positions us to better manage blood pressure and lowers the risk for stroke. Additionally, the Texas Health Science Center concluded that hope not only helps us to thrive, it can also help us to survive. High hope people tend to be better at setting goals and having multiple goals which allows them to refocus more quickly if they fail at something. When challenged with a crisis, less hopeful people tend to shut down, while hopeful people are more likely to take action and that helps them to cope (Weir, 2013). In terms of survival, hopelessness is more often associated with suicide than depression. Because many people are afraid to admit feelings of hopelessness it often goes underground.

Hope is the motivation to stay in the game. A big part of this motivation comes from other people, social support is crucial for hope. Hopeful people have also been recorded to have a greater sense that life is meaningful, and while hope and happiness aren't synonymous, they are linked. You have to knock down the hope domino to get to happiness. The good news is Hopeful people aren't necessarily overtly cheerful personality types. Researchers have uncovered tangible ways to raise your level of hope: (1) envision small goals clearly; (2) take small steps to work towards them; (3) plan for contingencies, most hopeful people tend to see multiple solutions to a problem; (4) plan to manage your anxiety on a daily basis; (5) be mindful of sleep and exercise; (6) seek out social support while still social distancing; (7) don't let catastrophic thoughts run wild, it distorts facts and feelings; (8) keep to familiar patterns when possible; and most importantly (9) look for moments of beauty and grace. Finally, don't forget to offer hope whenever you can. We can all benefit from regular infusions.