

Finding Hope When Everything Feels Hopeless
Elizabeth Bernstein, The Wall Street Journal, October 27, 2020

I've got the perfect four-letter word for the moment: Hope.

Yes, it feels increasingly elusive—seven months into a pandemic, during an emotionally exhausting election cycle, as winter bears down. Yet hope is the very best reaction for the moment, psychologists say. It's crucial to our physical and mental health. It guards against anxiety and despair. And it protects us from stress: Research shows that people with higher levels of hope have better coping skills and bounce back from setbacks faster. They're better at problem-solving and have lower levels of burnout. They have stronger relationships, because they communicate better and are more trusting. And they're less-stressed parents—more able to teach their children to set goals and solve problems.

“You can think of hope as a PPE—a Personal Protective Emotion,” says Anthony Scioli, a professor of psychology at Keene State College in Keene, N.H., and co-author of “Hope in the Age of Anxiety” and “The Power of Hope.”

Most psychologists define hope as a yearning for something possible but not certain—such as a better future—and a belief that you have some power to make it happen. And they believe it has two crucial components: Agency, or the motivation, to achieve the desired goal. And a strategy, or pathway, to do that. This is how it differs from optimism, which is the belief the future will work out no matter what you do.

Think of it like this: If you want to lose 10 pounds, you need a plan—a healthy diet or an exercise program—and the willpower to follow it. Without this, you've got no real hope for a fitter body. Just wishful thinking.

The good news: Hope is malleable. You can boost it.

Some people are more hopeful than others, thanks to a combination of nature and nurture. Dr. Scioli believes these people draw on four main resources: Attachment is a sense of continued trust and connection to another person. Mastery, or empowerment, is a feeling of being strong and capable—and of having people you admire and people who validate your strengths. Survival has two features—a belief that you aren't trapped in a bad situation, and an ability to hold on to positive thoughts and feelings even while processing something negative. Spirituality is a belief in something larger than yourself.

The good news: Hope is malleable. You can boost it. Scientists say it's important that the area of the brain that activates when we feel hopeful—the rostral anterior cingulate cortex—sits at the intersection of the limbic system, which governs our emotions, and the prefrontal cortex, where thoughts and actions are initiated. This

shows we have some influence over feelings of hope (or hopelessness). “Hope is a choice,” says Rick Miller, clinical director of the Center for the Advanced Study and Practice of Hope at Arizona State University.

Of course, it seems harder to choose hope at the moment, when the world seems so bleak and our brains are on high alert, constantly scanning for threat. “Hope is competing with all our other thoughts and emotions for attention right now,” says Mr. Miller, author of “The Soul, Science and Culture of Hope.” “It has to struggle to find its place in our mind.”

Here’s some advice for everyone whose hope could use a boost right now.

Measure it

To increase hope, it helps to know your baseline or starting point—and which areas you need to improve.

In the early 1990s, a psychologist named C.R. Snyder created the Adult Trait Hope Scale, a list of 12 questions that test whether a person has both the agency and the pathway-thinking necessary for hope. And Dr. Scioli has a longer online quiz that explores the four areas he believes hopeful people draw on: attachment, mastery, survival and spirituality. It can measure both your current level of hope and your long-term capacity for it.

Read history

Since the pandemic began, I’ve read books on the Black Death, the Civil War, Winston Churchill’s inner circle during the London Blitz and Miami in 1980 (it was a very bad year). Each one cheered me up. They helped me put 2020 in perspective. They reminded me that bad times do end. And they gave me an intimate peek at how people have held onto hope in the darkest times.

“If you look at how surprising events often come about in unpredictable ways, it can get you out of a fatalist way of thinking,” says Michael Milona, an assistant professor of philosophy at Ryerson University in Toronto and author of a just-published white paper on hope and optimism commissioned by the John Templeton Foundation, a philanthropic institution that funds scientific research. Dr. Milona suggests focusing on the ways history has moved forward positively, such as the fall of the Berlin Wall or Nelson Mandela’s journey from prison to president of South Africa.

Future cast

Imagine yourself happy when life returns to normal. Arizona State’s Mr. Miller recommends visualizing four areas of your life—home and family, career,

community and recreation—and to ask yourself how you would like them to look in the future. Picture them in great detail. (Who are you with? What are you doing? How do you look?) Those are your goals. Next, think about what you need to do now to make that vision happen. Now you've got agency.

Take a small step

Often, when we're stressed, we become overwhelmed. Setting one goal for the week—and identifying the steps we need to take to reach it—can give us a sense of control. "Once we begin to experience the success in those steps, we start to see more clearly that the future is possible and we have the power to pursue that goal," says Chan Hellman, executive director of the Hope Research Center at the University of Oklahoma-Tulsa and co-author of "Hope Rising: How the Science of Hope Can Change Your Life."

Watch your words

When we despair, we tend to speak in absolutes: "I'll never catch a break." "Things will always be like this." "I'm overwhelmed." "We're doomed." These are hope killers.

Many years ago I interviewed Elie Wiesel, the Nobel laureate, author and Holocaust survivor. Mr. Wiesel told me something I have never forgotten: "Every word we speak or write matters."

Heed Mr. Wiesel's advice. Think carefully about your words. Use hopeful language: "I can." "We will." "It's possible."

Spread hope

Emotions are contagious. And everyone is searching for hope right now. So model it for others. Explain what makes you hopeful.

Share your goals. And describe how you plan to reach them. You may garner support. You'll inspire others, showing what is possible.

Remember: Hope begets hope. "When people around you are energized, that can energize you, as well," says Dr. Milona.