

The Power of Hope, and Recognizing When It's Hopeless

Hope can alter how you view yourself.

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Hope structures your life in anticipation of the future and influences how you feel in the present. Similar to optimism, hope creates a positive mood about an expectation, a goal, or a future situation. Such mental time travel influences your state of mind and alters your behavior in the present. The positive feelings you experience as you look ahead, imagining hopefully what might happen, what you will attain, or who you are going to be, can alter how you currently view yourself. Along with hope comes your prediction that you will be happy, and this can have behavioral consequences.

Hope shapes your methods of traversing your current situation. The cognitions associated with hope—how you think when you are hopeful—are pathways to desired goals and reflect a [motivation](#) to pursue goals (Snyder, Harris, Anderson, & Holleran, 1991). Better problem-solving abilities have been found in people who are hopeful when compared with low-hope peers (Change, 1998), and those who are hopeful have a tendency to be cognitively flexible and are able to mentally explore novel situations (Breznitz, 1986).

Technically, hope does not fit the criteria as an emotion. These criteria include the concept that emotions are automatic and reflexive, they cause physical and [behavioral changes](#) as a result of [nervous system](#) responses, and that they provide you with immediate information about a situation that can lead you to take action.

Although the concept of hope does not meet these criteria, papers on the subject that have been published in reputable psychological journals have referred to it as an emotional state. Lazarus (1999), for example, has explored the role of hope as an emotion and as a coping resource against despair. Perhaps hope is better understood as a [cognition](#) that creates a certain mood—a prolonged affective state—lacking the immediacy and

intensity of reflexive emotions, yet capable of determining one's outlook on life.

Having hope is to imagine a positive outcome. The directive of many motivational principles is to visualize what you want and imagine positive outcomes so that your behavior is unconsciously structured to create them. However, one does not need to turn to quantum explanations in order to account for the positive effects of hope.

[Unconscious](#) thought theory postulates that we are able to process information--to get your brain to work on a problem--in a non-conscious way that can lead to bursts of insight (Dijksterhuis & Nordgren, 2006). Most of the things we do are unconsciously processed. Thus, considering your endeavors before bedtime, or even going over your to-do list, is worthwhile since your brain is sensitive to your conscious perception of future events and will unconsciously work toward your goals.

Clinical drug trials are a good example of the power of hope. In clinical drug trials, a [medication](#) is compared with an inactive substance, commonly referred to as a [placebo](#). Recent studies of [antidepressants](#) doubt their efficacy when compared to a placebo in double-blind, randomized clinical trials. What's most notable is that in clinical trials where the placebo is engineered to produce side-effects, causing those who take it to believe that they are on the actual medication, the efficacy of the placebo is similar to that of the medication (Angell, 2011). In a discussion of these studies a friend suggested that, rather than referring to such inactive substances as a placebo, they should instead be called "hope."

The way in which a hopeful person handles disappointment differs from those who are not. Even if the present is unpleasant, the thought of a positive future can be [stress](#)-buffering and can reduce the impact of negative events or disappointment. Being unrelentingly [optimistic](#) about the future helps you to recognize that you are adaptable and capable, enabling you to reassure yourself that you will get through a tough time. Having a powerful hope that you will adapt also provides a limitlessly positive version of the future. Those who are hopeful and optimistic can make excuses for negative outcomes, while the [pessimist](#) may become resentful or negatively preoccupied.

In relationships, there are times when abandoning hope is psychologically healthier than holding onto it. My co-author and I wrote about such situations in our book, *The White Knight Syndrome: Rescuing Yourself From Your Need to Rescue Others* (Lamia & Krieger, 2009).

In ending a relationship, relinquishing hope means coming to terms with your failure. In a rescuing relationship, hope may have led you to assume that you could help your partner achieve his expressed goal: be it financial success, sobriety, security, or [happiness](#). Yet despite your efforts, you could not control whether or not he would be inclined to pursue your perception of a desirable path. Perhaps your hope was that your partner would become the one you wanted or wished him to be, and he would then need, love, and appreciate you. Relinquishing hope is hard to do because it means that you have failed to get what you expected from your relationship.

The feelings associated with giving up hope in a relationship are often the very same emotions you sought to avoid in the first place, including helplessness, despair, [depression](#), or yearning that are the negative counterparts of hope (Lazarus 1999). Yet giving up hope can also be very constructive and positive, depending on your attitude.

Giving up hope is sometimes prudent in situations where turning your [attention](#) elsewhere is necessary in order to actually reach your goal. Continuing to pursue a particular direction where you invariably encounter roadblocks, whether in a relationship, [career](#), or business venture, can obscure other avenues that may lead to achieving an objective.

In our culture, there is a particular glamour attributed to those who persist and win, in spite of limited hope for success. At the same time, having the strength to recognize when hope should be relinquished, and the courage to acknowledge your helplessness, can point you in an unsullied direction that is accompanied by new hope.

For more information regarding my books about emotions, see my [website](#).

This blog post is in no way intended as a substitute for medical or psychological [counseling](#). If expert assistance or counseling is needed, the services of a competent professional should be sought.

References

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