

# **Does Hope Have a Downside?**

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It seems sacrilegious to refer to hope in anything but the most positive terms. One only needs to think of hope's opposite – hopelessness – to know that is a state of mind we would never wish on someone else or ourselves. Hopelessness is implicated in the most serious of negative outcomes. Some consider hopelessness to be a cognitive state that makes people vulnerable to suicide according to the hopelessness theory of suicide. Negative thinking about future possibilities and a belief that one is helpless to improve his or her own future is believed to be a hallmark of the hopeless cognitive style (Klonsky, Kotov, Bakst, Rabinowitz & Bromet, 2012, as cited in Abramson, Alloy, Hogan, et al., 2000; Abramson, Metalsky, & Alloy, 1989).

In disease diagnosis, hopelessness can be very detrimental to the patient's ability to cope with the illness and treatment. Many studies can be found discussing the effect of hopelessness on individuals with a variety of ailments from cancer to Lyme disease. Again, we would never want to take away someone's hope, a very important component in being able to handle treatment and healing, and maintaining long-term health. According to the late researcher on hope, Charles Snyder PhD, hope is “a powerful psychological asset in the face of a challenging environment” (Snyder, 2000, as cited in Bruininks & Malle, 2006, p.329).

But, can there be times when hope is actually detrimental? I have often recalled listening many years ago to one of my favorite positive thinking teachers and psychologists, Robert Anthony, PhD, who said, “Hope is the expectation that something outside of ourselves, something or someone external, is going to come to our rescue and we will live happily ever after” (Anthony, 2005). In that lesson, he goes on to say that hope does not actually allow us to come from a place of strength when we want to change our lives. Instead, it can encourage passivity and a lowered feeling of self-efficacy.

This was the first time I ever thought of hope in less than glowing terms. Back then, what Dr. Anthony said made me wonder, every day, about the beautiful crystal and bead hanger

with a small gold medallion inscribed with the word “HOPE” that I had hung in my office cubicle. To bolster my spirits, I located it where I could see it easily throughout my workday. It was meant as an inspiration for something better as I worked at a job that seemed to get more difficult and dysfunctional each day. I failed to see a way out any time soon, and I suddenly wasn’t sure if seeing that simple word each day was making me feel stronger or more helpless. I could suddenly understand Dr. Anthony’s point.

### **Defining Hope**

The interesting thing about hope is that it is a common word we all use and a concept people assume is easy to understand, especially since hoping for something is an activity most of us have probably engaged in; however, it is more complex than it seems on the surface and often gets intermingled with such concepts as optimism and faith. Snyder believed people feel positive and motivated when they are hopeful. This is based on a sense of the potential for a successful outcome from their activity and energy spent towards a goal (known as agency) and their plans for achieving their goals (known as pathways) (Snyder, Irving, & Anderson, 1991, as cited in Snyder, Rand, & Sigmon, 2009).

Utpal Dholakia PhD explains further, “To elaborate on these two aspects of hope - “agency” and “pathways,” researchers tell us that hopeful people engage in more of something called “pathway thinking” where they are able to come up with lots of different ways in which they can successfully reach a chosen goal. And “agency thinking” is the idea that hopeful people also have greater motivation to use these pathways to initiate and then continue on with the actions that are needed to advance towards those goals” (Dholakia, 2017).

Snyder’s goal-setting theory regarded hope more as a cognitive activity rather than an emotion. He believed people get the positive feeling of hope from their goal-directed thoughts. Positive feelings and hope are generated by positive thoughts derived from success in reaching goals, while failing to meet goals results in negative thoughts and feelings (Bruininks & Malle, 2006).

While some researchers regard hope as an activity, others define it as an emotion. “Although hope is not usually classified as a basic emotion it can be considered one if the principle for classification is importance for human survival. It is difficult to imagine the

survival of a society without hope, especially in light of destruction brought about by wars and natural disasters” (Averill, 1994, as cited in Bruininks & Malle, 2006, p. 328).

Hope has also been studied as it relates to social systems and individuals, with various rules described for *how* people hope (Averill, Catlin, & Chon, 1990, as cited in Bruininks & Malle, 2006).

1. The *prudential rule* applies when the probability of attainment of the goal is considered realistic.
2. The *moralistic rule* states that people will only hope for what they believe is personally or socially acceptable.
3. The *priority rule* means that only outcomes and events that are important to the individual are hoped for. It has been found that if the object or outcome is important enough, the prudential and moralistic rules may be set aside.
4. The *action rule* states that people need to take appropriate action, if action is possible, to achieve their hoped for goals.

Hope has been considered as a cognitive activity as well as an emotional state. I believe there is credence in the thinking of both camps. Either way, if we're not careful and we rely only on hope, it can become the “white horse” that will carry us away from our problems. It becomes easy to believe if we just hope enough, our lives can change. The idea of hope can sometimes imply that hope is enough, but nothing gets done if we rely on hope alone. Just as the “action rule” above states, effort, if at all possible, is required to reach our goals and dreams.

### **Some Critics of Hope**

There seems to be no shortage of more extreme verbal critics of hope, including Greek novelist Nikos Kazantzakis, who believed when we lost hope we stopped acting. He believed it is more important to not hope for the outcomes we desire but to instead *strive* for what we desire. In his autobiography *Report to Greco*, Kazantzakis stated that German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche taught him to distrust every optimistic theory. “The faith most devoid of hope seemed to me not the truest, perhaps, but surely the most valorous. I considered the metaphysical hope an alluring

bait which true men do not condescend to nibble..." Nietzsche is also quoted in this pessimistic view on hope, "Hope is the worst of evils, for it prolongs the torment of men" (Messerly, 2017).

Leon Seltzer, PhD, called hope "this most paradoxical of subjects" and devised a list of seven "downsides" related to hope (Seltzer, 2018):

1. Hope as an inherently biased ideal.
2. Hope can set us up for disappointment and defeat.
3. Hope can hamper us from adequately preparing for negative outcomes.
4. Hope as something like prayer: wishing for something rather than - more forcefully - working toward it.
5. Hope as a forfeiture of personal power and control.
6. Hope as self-deception.
7. Hope as setting us up for . . . hopelessness.

### **Hope vs. Optimism**

However, as contradictory to the above theories as this may sound, effort *without* hope can be just as detrimental. Is it possible to succeed at any goal if pursued without hope? Perhaps an equally important element in the achieving of goals is optimism. Hope and optimism can be easily confused, but they are different.

"In one study conducted by Patricia Bruininks and Bertram Malle, the researchers asked lay people to define hope, optimism, and other related concepts, and write stories about when they had experienced these states. After conducting their analysis of these texts, the authors concluded: 'Most important, hope is distinct from optimism by being an emotion, representing more important but less likely outcomes, and by affording less personal control...When people do have a high degree of control, they may no longer need to be just hopeful but can be optimistic because the outcome is now attainable'" (Bruininks & Malle, 2006, as cited by Dholakia, 2017).

Even though many people think of hope and optimism as being the same, studies show they don't always relate to each other. It is not necessary to have one to have the other. "One study in the *Journal of Positive Psychology* found correlations between optimism and agency [goal-directed energy] to be +0.32 and between optimism and pathways [planning to meet goals] to be +0.36. This suggests that people can be very optimistic but only mildly hopeful or vice versa. This same study also found that pathways predicted life satisfaction to a greater degree than optimism did" (Dholakia, 2017).

### **Hope and the Individual**

As simplistic as the following example seems, on an individual level, we know millions of people engage in a game of hope which carries the potential to change lives – the lottery. According to a 2016 Gallup poll, between 2003 and 2007, about half of Americans polled said within the last year they had played the state lottery ticket. Between 1996 and 1999, 57% of Americans reported they had bought a state lottery ticket (Auter, 2016).

What is more telling, but probably predictable, is that studies of hope and the lottery have shown that poorer people spend a higher percent of their income playing the lottery (Brinner & Clotfelter, 1975; Clotfelter & Cook, 1987, 1989; Livernois, 1987; Spiro, 1974; Suits, 1977, as cited in Haisley, Mostafa, & Loewenstein, 2008). People will cling to hope wherever they can, even with dismal odds. Statistics show that an average 3% of income was spent on the lottery by households earning less than \$10,000 on average annually (Clotfelter, Cook, Edell, & Moore, 1999, as cited in Haisley, Mostafa, & Loewenstein, 2008).

Another similar study was conducted on the belief that "low-income individuals may feel that their low standing in society prevents them from having the same opportunities as those with higher socioeconomic status. A game of chance, in a sense, levels the playing field and gives the poor the same opportunity to win as everyone else" (Haisley, Mostafa, & Loewenstein, 2008, p. 285). In other words, the lottery and similar activities give people hope.

Chris Guillebeau, a New York Times bestselling author, believes there is value in the kind of hope that activities like playing the lottery encourages, as long as that hope is tempered. He states, "But in your lottery fantasy, where you spend a brief moment thinking about what it

would be like to receive that oversized check, you *hope* for it. Your hope is not based on rationality, but that's okay. Hope is a choice. There is value in hope alone" (Guillebeau, 2019). Of course, most people probably know deep down, with the extremely low odds of winning the lottery or receiving any other similar windfall, effort is still needed to solve their problems and make their hopes come true.

## Hope and Society

On a societal scale, again we can find relying on hope to not only be unproductive, but also potentially dangerous. Our postmodern world faces many issues not encountered by past generations. One of the largest issues is that of climate change. For those who believe the scientists and are not climate change deniers, the future can seem daunting. We wonder just how the human race will address a problem of this magnitude while continuing to simultaneously grapple with day-to-day issues like work, family, retirement planning and everything in between. We look with *hope* to someone bigger than us – scientists, the government, God – to get us out of this mess. The fact that we want and need hope when it comes to the subject of climate change is evident by an internet full of articles about hope and climate change. Again, just as it relates to our individual life issues, hope is necessary to solve large-scale problems, but hope alone is not enough.

In this complex world with its unique problems, we also expect a lot of our leaders. Americans look to their president for sure words of encouragement that will keep us feeling secure. In a 2014 New York Times editorial, British philosopher and professor Simon Critchley stated a different, and more cynical, expectation of the president and was less laudatory of President Barack Obama's proclamation of hope. "When Barack Obama describes how he came to write his keynote speech to the 2004 Democratic National Convention, the speech that instantly shot him to fame and laid the basis for his presidential campaign and indeed his presidency, he recalls a phrase that his pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr., used in a sermon: the audacity of hope. Obama says that this audacity is what 'was the best of the American spirit,' namely 'the audacity to believe despite all the evidence to the contrary.'"

"It is precisely this kind of hope that I think we should try to give up. It is not audacious, but mendacious. As the wise Napoleon said, 'a leader is a dealer in hope' who governs by

insisting on a bright outlook despite all evidence to the contrary” (Critchley, 2014). The responsibility to provide a secure outlook can be daunting for our leaders, and contradictory for us as we look to our leaders for hope but often see a different reality.

### **Hope, Action and Goal Achievement**

As we have seen, a recurring theme in studies about maintaining hope is that hope is attached to goals and people need to have some belief that they can attain their goals. They need to be attached to the future outcome they desire and see some way to eventually reach that outcome. (Less study has been done on the maintenance of hope when people feel little control over outcomes.) To achieve any of our goals, whether they are for our individual lives or on a societal level, I believe we need the right “dosage” of hope coupled with action to temper the effects of hope. Perhaps we even need the *right kind* of hope. Not all hope is the same. There is hope with and without expectations, as well as realistic and unrealistic hope. John G. Messerly, PhD who was a faculty member of both the philosophy and computer science departments at the University of Texas at Austin said, “For instance, when confronted by the reality of the concentrations camps, Viktor Frankl didn’t hope to dig his way out of his prison. That wasn’t possible. Instead, he hoped that the war would end and he might be freed. That was realistic. Thus the difference between false and realistic hope. The former is delusional, the latter worthwhile. Sometimes only fools keep believing; sometimes you should stop believing. False hopes prolong misery” (Messerly, 2017).

Some people see a place for hope in our lives as long as we keep our hopes realistic. Perhaps a downside of hope is when things don’t work out the way we hoped while our expectations were high. There can also be a downside to low expectations. Hopelessness can induce the expectancy of negative outcomes and a bleak future resulting in sadness (Abramson, Metalsky, & Alloy, 1989). Guillebeau offers a compromise in order to keep hoping in check. “You can also hope for miracles. You can keep your hopes inside you, safe from harm, and bring them to mind whenever you’d like. Because if you hope for something without expecting it, you won’t be devastated when time goes by and it doesn’t happen, but you still hold space for it in your heart. This choice, all by itself, has value” (Guillebeau, 2019).

The world and internet abound with those that strongly espouse that hope is nothing without action. Science fiction writer Ray Bradbury said in a 2012 interview, “Action is hope. There is no hope without action” (Weller, 2012). Motivational speaker and sales leader Anthony Iannarino also had strong words against hope without action in a recent blog post. “Hope. The very word suggests that one believes what they want is out of their control. Something unavailable to them without divine intervention. It suggests passivity and waiting. Hope and waiting are the twin diseases of the disempowered, those who believe they lack agency. Of all the strategies one might choose to produce better results, hope should not be one of them, least of all the reliance on luck, or chance, or circumstances to unfold in a way that is favorable to you. Any strategy that requires that one do nothing but wish for what they want is to believe that reality in some way resembles a fairy tale” (Iannarino, 2018).

Bryan Golden, author, speaker and motivational expert wrote, “There is no accomplishment without action. Those who wait for something to happen are always waiting. Hoping for your desired outcome may be uplifting, but without action, it's ineffectual. Action is an essential component of success” (Golden, 2017).

While I appreciate what feels like very Western approaches coupling hope with meaningful action, I can't help but think of the situations of individuals such as Viktor Frankl. He successfully kept a certain hope and meaning of life alive while he had no real options for goal-directed (escape from a concentration camp) activity. His experience brings to mind another extreme example of maintaining hope in the midst of dire circumstances and very little control – the Donner Party. Of the original 87 members who made it to camp at Donner Lake, “most of the males (30 out of 53) died; most of the females (24 out of 34) survived. The 57 percent death rate among males was nearly double the 29 percent death rate among females” (Diamond, 1992).

It has been speculated that one of the reasons the Donner Party female survival rate was higher was because they had primary responsibility for taking care of the children and it fell on them to keep their children, and hope, alive. The death toll was highest among men (67%) in the prime of life, age 20-39, who were not attached to a family. In addition, many of the Donner Party men died violently along the journey while the women tended to their families. “It's clear, though, why social contacts are important for both sexes. They provide concrete help in case of



need. They're our source of advice and shared information. They provide a sense of belonging and self-worth, and the courage to face tomorrow. They make stress more bearable" (Diamond, 1992). I would add it was the social contacts which increased the hope that helped those members of the Donner Party who did survive.

Survivors of the Donner Party and their descendants went on to live in what could be considered a hope-inspired way, possibly made stronger and more lasting because of their ordeal. Michael Wallis, author of *The Best Land Under Heaven: The Donner Party In The Age Of Manifest Destiny*, got to know the Donner Party descendants and said, "They're wonderful people, from every walk of life, and I found who were willing to talk and share some of their archival material. There was no guilt or embarrassment. They know they're part of history, they're bright people with a great sense of humor, which is very important" (Worrall, 2017).

In considering the hope it took for the Donner Party survivors to go forward and live productive lives, psychiatrist Neel Burton's article seems fitting in a philosophical way, "At a deeper level, hope links our present to our past and future, providing us with a metanarrative or overarching story that lends our life shape and meaning. Our hopes are the strands that run through our life, defining our struggles, our successes and setbacks, our strengths and shortcomings, and in some sense ennobling them" (Burton, 2014).

## **Hope and Helping People**

After extensive studies on hope, hope researchers Bruininks and Malle believe hope is an important part of the new psychology model. "Our work fits well into the area of positive psychology with its focus on positive aspects of human life - that is, on strengths, abilities, and pleasant psychological states - rather than on weaknesses, disabilities, and unpleasant psychological states" (Bruininks & Malle, 2006, p. 353).

From the 1960s through 1980s, Psychiatrist Jerome D. Frank, former Johns Hopkins University Medical School professor, was one of the first to say that the process of hope could be found commonly used in various approaches to psychotherapy. He believed that regardless of the psychotherapeutic approach, learning effective goal-directed thinking resulted in positive change in clients, and that psychotherapy that helps clients find a way to attain positive therapeutic goals reflects the pathways component. In addition, "By applying hope theory to

several psychotherapies, a potential benefit would be increased cooperation among the proponents of varying camps” (Snyder, Rand, & Sigmon, 2009, pp. 266-267). It seems incumbent on psychotherapists to weigh and consider the use of hope in their own practices as research (and common sense) is proving that hope has demonstrable positive effects on people’s lives.

## **Conclusion**

When I began to write this essay, I set out to demonstrate what I thought was my belief about hope, namely that hope can be a de-motivator for real effort *if* people passively rely upon it to make their goals and dreams come true. Instead, I found that this intangible we call hope is essential to human beings. While considering the various studies and expert opinions I also came to find that nobody seems to have the one true answer for what hope is and why it can so strongly affect our lives, successes and failures. Hope is even hard to generalize for all people. It seems to show up in different people to different degrees depending upon the circumstances they are faced with, their feelings of self-efficacy, their tendency toward optimism or pessimism, and even their belief in having faith in something they can’t see at the time. Hope is certainly real but our full understanding of it is ever evasive as it has an almost mystical quality that defies being neatly defined. Perhaps a melding of Western and Eastern types of thought (goal directed vs. state of being) would be a more beneficial way to view such an esoteric concept as hope and whether hope is “good or bad.” Used with consideration of each person’s unique nature, hope can be an integral tool towards successful psychological outcomes.

I now envision hope as a kind of pilot light of our “beingness.” The flame burns quietly away at the depth of who we are, rising and lowering depending on our temperaments and circumstances. But if that pilot light goes out completely, we may give up or maybe even cease to be.

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