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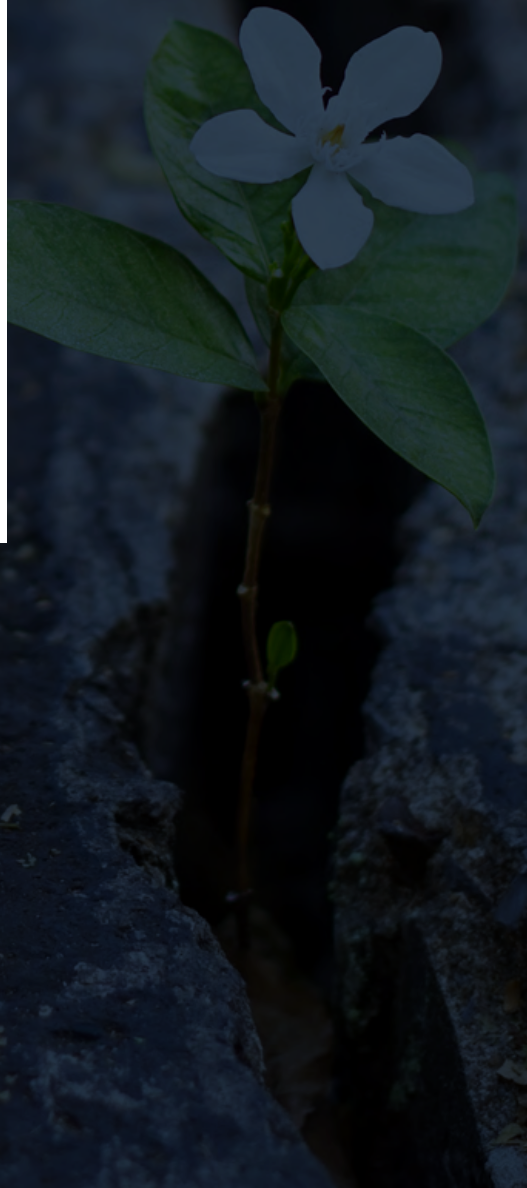


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THE SCIENCE OF HOPE

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PART I WHAT IS HOPE?

When people are going through tough times, they will often say, “I hope things get better soon.” People may also feel hopeful when they are dreaming about a positive future. They may hope that they will get a new job or feel hopeful that they will meet a romantic partner to spend the rest of their life with. Historically speaking, hope has been viewed as both a psychological strength and a liability. Philosophers such as Thomas Aquinas and much later Soren Kierkegaard, for example, viewed hope as a central virtue that played a vital role in human action and communion with God, whereas philosophers such as Rene Descartes and Friedrich Nietzsche viewed hope as desire absent of agency and largely dismissed it as an irrational and unproductive form of thinking.¹

Formal psychological perspectives on hope did not appear until the twentieth century. In the 1960s and 1970s, hope was studied as “positive expectation,” and in the early 1990s, Charles R. Snyder² introduced the most influential psychological theory on hope, hope theory. Since Snyder’s hope theory, there has been growing interest in exploring hope empirically. This has led to insights about the importance of hope for health and human progress as well as formal interventions and informal strategies to spread hope.

In this report, I discuss how social researchers define and measure hope and review empirical research on the benefits of hope for individuals and communities, as well as research on interventions and strategies that build hope. Finally, based on this research, I offer recommendations to spread hope.

DEFINING HOPE

Snyder’s hope theory presents hope as both a desire and a mindset that plays an important role in human motivation and agency. First, hope involves a person’s desire to realize some positive outcome or avoid a negative outcome. Snyder referred to desired outcomes as goals. Snyder had an inclusive definition for goals: goals can be very specific, such as winning an award, or very broad, such as being healthy; goals can be spoken or imagined; and goals could be in the immediate future or many years down the road. Hope theory also considers hope to be a mindset or way of thinking about goals that supports commitment, motivation, and progress. Specifically, the theory outlines two types of thinking: *pathway thinking* and *agency thinking*, that make up the hopeful mindset.

For people to feel hopeful about their goals they need to be able to imagine a scenario where they will attain them. Pathway thinking, the first aspect of the hopeful mindset, involves a person’s thinking about the routes or strategies they will take when pursuing their goals. Hopeful people will be able to identify and commit to a course of action to pursue their goals. Hopeful people will also be flexible to come up with new courses of action for accomplishing a goal when they encounter obstacles or if their initial pathway is blocked.

Feeling hopeful also requires people to believe that they will accomplish their goals or attain the outcome they desire. Agency thinking, the second aspect of the hopeful mindset, involves the general and enduring belief that you will achieve your goals. Snyder considers agency thinking to be the motivational aspect of hope, the aspect that drives or inspires people to engage in

goal-related action, and the confidence people need to persist and not be deterred by setbacks.

Hope requires both agency and pathway thinking. Pathway thinking and agency thinking are thought to reinforce one another. For example, the belief that one will accomplish their goal (agency thinking) will help people feel confident that the strategies they come up with to pursue their goal (pathway thinking) will be successful. Moreover, having effective strategies for accomplishing a goal will inspire confidence that a person will accomplish their goal.³

Of course, pathway thinking and agency thinking don't always go hand in hand. There can be instances where a person engages in positive pathway thinking but negative agency thinking, or negative pathway thinking but positive agency thinking. An example of positive pathway thinking and negative agency thinking is a student who knows how to prepare for an exam but has difficulty studying because they do not believe they can pass the exam no matter how hard they try. In this situation, it is thought that the desire to pursue the goal could diminish, even if the strategies for attaining the goal are clear because confidence and motivation are lacking.

An example of negative pathway thinking and positive agency thinking is the new employee who lacks experience and know-how to complete a task but has a strong belief that they will find a way. In this situation, the desire to pursue a goal could diminish if one is unable to identify an effective pathway. However, there are situations where people may hold on to hope when the desired outcome seems unlikely. For example, a person may hold on to hope for a family member to recover from an incurable disease. In these cases, the value or importance of a goal can sustain the belief that the goal will come to pass and keep people committed even if the goal seems improbable.⁴

QUANTIFYING HOPE

Measuring hope typically involves the use of surveys. Surveys are often used in social science research to get insight into people's personalities, attitudes, thoughts, and feelings because surveys are relatively quick and inexpensive to administer to a large swath of people, compared to methods such as interviews or focus groups. Survey instruments have been developed and tested to measure hope both as a trait and as a state.

Trait Measures

Trait measures are used by social scientists to measure personality and other individual differences that are thought to be relatively stable. Trait hope measures have been developed and translated to conduct research in several languages such as Spanish,⁵ Portuguese,⁶ French,⁷ Dutch,⁸ Arabic,⁹ and Chinese,¹⁰ to name a few.

Adult Hope Scale. The Adult Hope Scale is a trait hope measure that was developed to measure hope as described in Snyder's hope theory.¹¹ The Adult Hope Scale is meant to assess the extent to which people engage in pathway thinking and agency thinking. Respondents are presented with four statements meant to reflect pathway thinking (e.g., "There are lots of ways around any problem") and four statements meant to reflect agency thinking (e.g., "I meet the goals I set for myself") and are asked to indicate on a 1 to 8 scale how true or false each statement is in representing how they generally approach their goals. Responses on the pathway statements and the agency statements are either summed or averaged to create pathway scores and agency scores, respectively, though responses on pathway and agency items can and often are combined into a single hope score. Research has found the scale to be a valid, reliable, and stable survey instrument.¹²

Children's Hope Scale. The Children's Hope Scale is a version of the Adult Hope Scale intended to assess pathways and agency thinking in children ages 8 to 16 years old. Compared to the Adult Hope Scale, the Children's Hope Scale is shorter (containing two fewer statements) and contains language tested to be easily understood by 8- to 16-year-old children. Children use a 1 to 6 scale to rate how often three statements designed to reflect pathway thinking (e.g., "When I have a problem, I can come up with lots of ways to solve it") and three statements designed to reflect agency thinking (e.g., "I am doing just as well as other kids my age") describe them.¹³

Herth Hope Measures. The Herth Hope Scale is another survey instrument designed to assess trait hope. This instrument was not informed by hope theory, but approaches hope in a roughly similar fashion. The Herth Hope Scale contains 30 statements and instructs respondents to use a 1 to 4 scale to rate the extent to which each statement is true of how they feel. The instrument assesses three dimensions of hope. The first dimension is called the cognitive-temporal dimension of hope. Like agency thinking, statements

designed to assess the cognitive-temporal dimension reflect a person's confidence that they will attain a desired outcome. The second dimension is referred to as the affective-behavioral dimension of hope. Like pathway thinking, statements designed to assess the affective-behavioral dimension of hope reflect a feeling of confidence in plans/strategies for attaining a desired outcome. The third dimension is called the affiliative-contextual dimension and does not correspond to aspects of the hopeful mindset outlined by Snyder's hope theory. Statements designed to assess the affiliative-contextual dimension reflect a person's feelings that they are connected with and supported by other people.¹⁴ The Herth Hope Index is a shorter version of the Herth Hope Scale that contains 12 statements meant to reflect the same hope dimensions assessed by the Herth Hope Scale.¹⁵ The Herth survey instruments were designed to be used in healthcare clinics and therefore are most often used in nursing and medical research.

State Hope Measures. Researchers have also developed state measures of hope. Psychologists make use of state measures to assess a person's in-the-moment thoughts, feelings, and attitudes. The State Hope Scale is a survey instrument based on the hope theory designed to assess the extent to which respondents are engaged in pathway and agency thinking at any given moment. Respondents are instructed to "focus on yourself and what is going on in your life at this moment" and use a 1 to 8 scale to rate the extent to which several statements describe their current mindset. Three of the statements are meant to reflect pathway thinking (e.g., "If I should find myself in a jam, I could think of many ways to get out of it") and three statements are meant to reflect agency thinking

(e.g., "At the present moment, I am energetically pursuing my goals"). This too is a valid measure.¹⁶ It is often used in experimental research, which is focused on how situations change hope, including research to evaluate interventions designed to promote hope.¹⁷

Differentiating Hope from Optimism

These measures have allowed researchers to determine whether and how hope is different from similar constructs like optimism. Optimism is thought of as a generalized belief that good things will happen and bad things will be avoided without much thought as to how desired outcomes will be achieved.¹⁸ According to hope theory, hope also comprises the belief that good things will happen, but unlike optimism, it involves thoughts about how a goal will be achieved. Thus, at the theoretical level, hope and optimism are believed to be distinct phenomena.¹⁹ Researchers have looked to verify this assumption by looking at the association between measures of hope and optimism.

A recent meta-analytic study that combined and summarized the results of dozens of research studies on hope and optimism found that, although hope and optimism are positively associated, they are not redundant measures. Measures of hope and optimism were predictive of different psychological outcomes. Specifically, optimism was more strongly associated with personality than hope, whereas hope was more strongly predictive of feelings such as happiness and reduced stress. Hope and optimism were similarly associated with lower depression but were found to be unique predictors of depression risk.²⁰





PART II

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF HOPE?

A growing body of empirical research indicates that a hopeful mindset has several personal benefits. First, hopeful people tend to lead healthier lives both in terms of psychological health and physical health. Second, research indicates that hopeful people exhibit success in a variety of life domains including academics, athletics, job/career, and parenting. In this section, I review the research that has established hope as an important psychological factor for a healthy and productive life.

THE INDIVIDUAL BENEFITS OF HOPE

Hope Benefits Well-Being

Research on the psychological benefits of hope suggests that hope supports a variety of adaptive psychological states such as happiness, life satisfaction, self-worth, meaning in life, and feelings of social belonging.

Hope Promotes Happiness. A hopeful mindset helps people reach desired outcomes and avoid undesired outcomes through flexible pathways and robust agency beliefs and therefore allows them to maximize positive life experiences and minimize negative ones. Indeed, one study found that hopeful adults reported generally experiencing more positive moods/emotions and less negative moods/emotions.²¹ Another study had college students report how hopeful they felt as well as how positive and negative their experiences, thoughts, and feelings were each day for 27 days. On days when the students reported feeling more hopeful, they tended to experience more positive experiences, thoughts, and feelings, and fewer negative ones.²² Thus, hopeful people tend to be happier than less hopeful people.

Hope Promotes Life Satisfaction. Most consider a happy life to be a more satisfying life, and so it is not surprising that hope is associated with life satisfaction. For example, one study assessed trait hope and general satisfaction in various life domains including love/relationships, work, leisurely and recreational activities, and physical surroundings/location, in a college

sample and a community sample. In both samples, hopeful people reported greater satisfaction across the various life domains.²³ Research has also studied satisfaction in terms of self-worth, finding that hopeful people are more satisfied with who they are than less hopeful people.²⁴

Hope Promotes Meaning in Life. Meaning in life is another component of a psychologically healthy life. A meaningful life is one in which a person feels like what they do is important, coherent, and has a purpose.²⁵ A meaningful life is not always a pleasant one. That is, people often derive meaning and a sense of purpose from activities, like parenting, that are highly stressful.²⁶ Of course, positive experiences also contribute to meaning in life.²⁷ Whether the experience is positive or negative, people derive meaning from making progress toward accomplishing personally important goals.²⁸ Hopeful people are more goal-oriented and successful in finding ways to accomplish their goals,²⁹ so it is unsurprising that various research studies have found that hopeful people tend to report a strong sense that their life is meaningful and purpose-driven.³⁰

Hope Promotes Relationships and Belonging. Personal relationships are an important component of a psychologically healthy life. People need to feel loved, and social support is important for managing stress and overcoming life's challenges and tragedies. For example, loneliness is a significant risk factor for depression, suicide, substance abuse, and various stress-related diseases such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and pre-

mature death.³¹ Research suggests that hope plays a role in maintaining healthy and supportive interpersonal relationships. First, research suggests that the hopeful mindset may help establish interpersonal bonds. For example, research indicates that hopeful adults and children, compared to less hopeful adults, tend to be more conscious about making positive impressions on others.³² A study on children found that hope was associated with perceived social acceptance; high-hope children tended to view themselves as being accepted by and popular with their peers compared to less hopeful children.³³

Hopeful people also appear to get more positive benefits from their interpersonal relationships. For example, a study on middle school students (sixth, seventh, and eighth grade) in Greece measured hope and probed how children perceived their successful and unsuccessful friendships. Overall, hopeful students reported feeling good about the quality of their friendships. Additionally, there was evidence that, compared to less hopeful children, hopeful children got more out of their successful friendships and were less impacted by unsuccessful friendships. When it came to making sense of their successful friendships, hopeful kids were more likely to acknowledge and feel good about their role in the friendship. However, when it came to making sense of their less successful friendships, hopeful kids were more likely to consider factors outside of their control.

For less hopeful kids the opposite was true. Less hopeful kids tended to downplay their contributions to successful friendships and were less likely to consider factors outside of their control in explaining unsuccessful friendships, instead, they tended to be preoccupied with how they were responsible for unsuccessful friendships.³⁴ Research indicates that taking appropriate credit for successes and externalizing some of the blame for failures helps people maintain self-worth and confidence.³⁵ Thus, hopeful people seem to derive more satisfaction and esteem from successful relationships and suffer less from unsuccessful ones.

Finally, research suggests that hopeful people report feeling more secure in their relationships³⁶ and are generally less lonely compared to low-hope people.³⁷ Because of the quality of their relationships, high-hope people are better able to rely on others in times of stress and uncertainty.

Hope Benefits Mental Health

In addition to helping people to attain satisfying, meaningful, and socially supportive lives, hope contributes to psychological resilience. Psychological resilience refers to a person's ability to adapt and bounce back from difficult situations in life. Hopeful people should be better able to persist in the face of adversity because of their enduring agency beliefs and should be better at coming up with alternate paths or strategies for overcoming challenges/setbacks. Indeed, research suggests that hopeful people are better at identifying effective ways of coping with life challenges.

For example, a study on adolescent burn victims found that hopeful children were more likely to rely on social support from their families to help them adjust to their post-accident lives, compared to less hopeful children.³⁸ Another study found that Fibromyalgia patients high in hope were more likely to report feeling like living with chronic pain helped them to learn about themselves and made them stronger people. Hope also predicts better coping with everyday stressors. One study measured hope and strategies for coping with everyday stress in a group of ethnic minority high school students across five days. The study found that students who scored high in hope were more likely to cope with stressors by making plans to solve their problems and by maintaining positive thoughts about overcoming stressors, whereas low-hope students tended to avoid their problems.³⁹

Hope Promotes Coping with Loss and Chronic Stressors. Considering hopeful people make use of better strategies to cope with difficult situations in life, it should be no surprise that lack of hope is predictive of mental illness, whereas hopeful people are less likely to develop mental illness from loss and chronic adversity.⁴⁰ Michael and Snyder,⁴¹ for example, tested whether hope assists with grieving the death of a loved one. The researchers measured levels of hope, anxiety, symptoms of depression, and general negative emotions among college students who had recently experienced the death of a close friend or family member. They found that the more hopeful students were the less they experienced anxiety, depression, and negative emotion.

Providing care for a sick or disabled family member is highly stressful, and caregivers are at an increased risk for developing burnout, persistent anxiety, and

depression. One study looked at the role of hope in preventing negative outcomes among people caring for family members with advanced stages of cancer for nine months. They found that caregivers who reported high levels of hope at the start of the study had lower levels of anxiety and fewer depression symptoms over the nine months.⁴² Finally, research suggests that hope generally buffered the negative impact of pandemic-related stress on psychological health in the general population and among frontline medical workers.⁴³

Hope Promotes Resilience to Trauma. Hope also helps avoid negative mental health outcomes associated with traumatic life events.⁴⁴ For example, a study tested whether hope attenuates the link between traumatic experiences and depression by having college students report whether they had experienced several potentially traumatic events and then also complete measures to assess depressive symptoms and trait hope. They found that students who experienced more negative and potentially traumatic events reported more severe depression symptoms. However, hope appeared to attenuate the impact of traumatic events on depression; hopeful students experienced fewer and less intense depression symptoms even if they had experienced potentially traumatic life events.⁴⁵ Other research has found that hope prevents negative mental health outcomes associated with sexual assault⁴⁶ and childhood trauma.⁴⁷

Hope Promotes Resilience to Loneliness and Lack of Social Belonging. As mentioned earlier in this report, chronic loneliness is a serious risk factor for psychological dysfunction.⁴⁸ Hope prevents mental illness associated with loneliness. For example, a 2019 study measured hope along with loneliness and symptoms of anxiety and depression in college students from a Hungarian university. Students who experienced chronic loneliness were more likely to report elevated symptoms of depression and anxiety, but hope eliminated this. Specifically, the association between loneliness and anxiety/depression symptoms was not found among students who reported high levels of hope.⁴⁹

Hope Reduces Suicide Risk. Lack of social belonging is also a risk factor for suicide. A study on college students found that students who reported chronic adversity in their social lives were more likely to report having thoughts of suicide. However, the link between social adversity and suicide ideation was not found among those who scored high on a measure of trait hope.⁵⁰

Other studies have focused on the link between the suicide risk of loneliness, thwarted belongingness, and perceived burdensomeness. Thwarted belonging is like loneliness but describes a specific situation where a person feels disconnected from loved ones and that their loved ones do not care for them as much as they care for their loved ones. Perceived burdensomeness, on the other hand, may or not correspond with loneliness and thwarted belongingness. It describes the situation where a person feels like they are a burden on other people. Loneliness, thwarted belongingness, and perceived burdensomeness have been found to predict suicidal ideation and behavior, but hope has been found to disrupt these links. For example, the 2019 study on Hungarian college students found that loneliness predicted suicidal ideation among low-hope people but not among people who scored high on a measure of trait hope.⁵¹ A study on suicide risk among older adults found evidence that the predictive value of thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness was weaker among hopeful people.⁵² Research on racial minority college students⁵³ and members of American Indian/Alaskan Native communities⁵⁴ have corroborated the findings that hope reduces thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness as risk factors for suicidal thoughts and behaviors.

Depression is the most common condition associated with suicidal thoughts and behaviors, and research indicates that hope plays a role in reducing suicide risk among depressed individuals. First, research assessing individual differences in trait hope, depression symptoms, and suicide ideation has provided evidence that depression symptoms are predictive of suicide ideation at low levels of hope but not at high levels of hope. This research suggests that hopeful people are better at managing depression symptoms to avoid suicide.⁵⁵

Perhaps hope acts as a light in the darkness to reduce negative thinking. Rumination, which involves dwelling on negative thoughts and feelings about oneself or the conditions of one's life, is a symptom of depression strongly tied to suicide. Hope, it appears, helps disrupt the association between rumination and thoughts of suicide. A study assessed college students' general feelings of hope, how often they experienced brooding (a kind of rumination that involves judging oneself for thinking about the same negative thoughts or feelings over and over), and how frequently they had thoughts of suicide in the past two weeks. Brooding was associated with greater suicide ideation at low levels of hope but

not at high levels of hope. Thus, hopeful people may be better able to manage depression to avoid serious outcomes such as suicide.⁵⁶

Hope Supports Mental Illness Recovery. Also speaking to the importance of hope in recovery from mental illness is research that suggests hope has an important impact on how responsive people are to therapy. For many people, starting therapy represents a new hope for recovery and relief from mental illness, and researchers have suggested that this represents an increase in a person's agency belief, the belief that things will get better. The therapy itself should not only reinforce agency beliefs but also help people find solid pathways for navigating the negative parts of their psychological lives to find more adaptive ways of thinking, acting, and managing their feelings. Indeed, a study on recipients of psychotherapy found that hope was associated with positive change and reduced psychological symptoms across 12 weeks of individual therapy. Interestingly, increased agency beliefs seemed to be more important in explaining the early benefits of therapy, whereas pathway thinking was more important in explaining benefits in later therapy sessions. This research suggests that psychotherapy is beneficial, in part, because it inspires hope and that hope plays an important role in recovery from mental illness.⁵⁷

Taken together, the research in this section points to the mental health benefits of hope. Hope is associated with less risk for conditions such as anxiety and depression. This appears to be, in part, explained by the role of hope in psychological resilience. High-hope people appear to be more likely to engage in productive coping strategies, are better at managing stress related to adversity and potentially traumatic life events, and can bounce back from setbacks to persist in pursuing important life goals. Hope and the resilience that it inspires also appear to play a role in recovery from mental illness and are important in preventing extreme outcomes of poor mental health such as suicide.

Hope Benefits Physical Health

Hopeful people are not only psychologically healthier but also physically healthier. Studies have focused on hope's role in encouraging healthy goals and behaviors, as well as how hope assists people in adjusting to and living with chronic diseases.

Hope Promotes Health Goals. A popular health goal, especially when it comes to New Year's resolutions, is

losing weight or getting in better physical shape. Hope should assist people in these aspirational health goals because pathway thinking supports flexible strategies to engage in healthy behaviors and resist the temptation of unhealthy behaviors, and strong agency beliefs should help people maintain the resolve that they will be successful in attaining their health goals and persisting in desired healthy behaviors such as eating a healthy diet and/or exercising regularly. Indeed, many studies have linked hope to healthy behaviors. For example, a study on college students found that those who scored high on a trait measure of hope were less likely to report engaging in binge drinking or smoking, compared to students who scored lower on the hope measure. Hopeful college students also reported exercising more frequently and eating lower-fat diets compared to less hopeful students.⁵⁸ Separate research on community adult and college samples has corroborated the link between hope, exercise, and healthy eating.⁵⁹

Hope Promotes Preventative Health Behaviors. Other research indicates that hopeful people are more likely to engage in actions to prevent specific diseases. For example, one study found that college women who scored high on measures of trait hope were more knowledgeable about risk factors for cancer and reported stronger intentions to get screened for cancer and take steps to reduce their risk for cancer.⁶⁰ Similarly, Feldman and Sills⁶¹ found that hopeful patients expressed stronger intentions to change their behavior to reduce their risk for cardiovascular disease. Compared to less hopeful patients, hopeful patients vowed to reduce salt/fat intake and to visit a physician more regularly for checkups and information on cardiovascular disease.

Hope Promotes Adjustment to Chronic Disease. When a person or their loved one is diagnosed with a chronic disease and it is uncertain whether they will recover and/or be able to maintain the quality of life they had before being diagnosed, people often talk about the importance of "holding on to hope."⁶² Indeed, research has found that hope plays an important role in helping people psychologically adjust to living with a chronic disease.⁶³ Specifically, studies have found that hopeful people with chronic health conditions generally report a higher quality of life compared to less hopeful people.⁶⁴ Research also suggests that hopeful people with chronic health conditions experience less worry and distress related to their health⁶⁵ and can maintain a positive and resilient mindset.⁶⁶ Hope also appears to play a role in how people with chronic diseases think

about death and survival. Specifically, one study found that hopeful cancer patients reported being less afraid of or worried about dying and more accepting of the fact that they could die from cancer.⁶⁷ Another study followed women during their first year after being diagnosed with breast cancer and found that women who were high in trait hope at the beginning of the year reported being less fearful that their cancer would return/worsen over the year.⁶⁸ Generally, the benefits of hope for psychologically adjusting to chronic health conditions have been found in both children and adults.⁶⁹

Hope also appears to impact how people experience symptoms of chronic health conditions. For example, a study on blinded military veterans in the United States found that hopeful individuals reported feeling less constrained by their visual impairments compared to less hopeful individuals.⁷⁰ Many studies have examined whether hope plays a role in managing pain. For example, one study found that hope impacts how people experience acute pain, demonstrating that hopeful college students were better able to tolerate a mildly painful laboratory task (i.e., submerging a hand in icy cold water) compared to less hopeful students.⁷¹ Hope also appears to be beneficial for managing chronic pain. A recent meta-analysis that combined findings from 96 studies provided strong evidence that hopeful chronic pain sufferers report less pain severity, better overall physical functioning, and less psychological distress resulting from pain.⁷² Other research has focused on fatigue, another common symptom of chronic health conditions. This research collected data from adults diagnosed with fibromyalgia, arthritis, and irritable bowel disease and found that hopeful people reported experiencing less fatigue compared to less hopeful people. Moreover, it appeared that this fatigue difference was partially explained by how hopeful people manage stress; hopeful people reported experiencing stress less often, and these lower stress levels in turn predicted less fatigue.⁷³

Taken together, hope benefits physical health. Maintaining a hopeful mindset helps people live a healthy lifestyle by supporting their efforts to engage in healthy behaviors and change their habits to prevent negative health outcomes. Maintaining a hopeful mindset is also important for managing chronic health conditions. Hopeful people are more likely to experience less severe symptoms and are better able to psychologically adjust to living with chronic health conditions to maintain positive attitudes about their health and quality of life.

Having established that hopeful people generally lead healthier lives, next I review evidence on the benefits of hope in specific life domains.

Hope Benefits Student Performance

Research has established a link between hope and academic achievement in elementary school, middle and high school, and college. Specifically, high-hope students have been found to earn higher grades than low-hope students. Moreover, studies have found that hope measured at an initial period predicts grades months and years in the future. For example, one study found that students who reported high levels of hope at the start of middle school (sixth grade) earned higher grades throughout middle school (at the end of sixth, seventh, and eighth grades).⁷⁴ Other studies have found that students who enter high school⁷⁵ and college⁷⁶ with a hopeful mindset graduate with higher grade point averages than students who enter with low hope.

The link between hope and academic performance is robust, as it persists even in research that controls for other aspects that explain student performance. For example, hope helps to explain academic achievement even after controlling for psychological factors like anxiety,⁷⁷ self-esteem,⁷⁸ optimism,⁷⁹ and personality.⁸⁰ Hope has also been found to predict student grades beyond what can be explained by various demographic factors such as gender, race/ethnicity, and whether kids live in a rural or urban setting.⁸¹ Finally, hope has been found to predict student grades even after controlling for academic factors such as intelligence, standardized test scores, and past academic achievement.⁸²

Beyond grades, hopeful high school and college students are more likely to persist toward graduation.⁸³ Even students labeled “at risk” were less likely to drop out if they had high levels of hope.⁸⁴ This may be because hopeful students have been found to experience mental health problems to a lesser extent and are less likely to struggle with behavioral issues at school.⁸⁵ Taken together, hope is an asset for student achievement.

Hope Benefits Athletic Pursuits

Athletic performance is often viewed as a combination of natural talent and drive/dedication. Research suggests that hope is one way of understanding the drive component of athletic achievement. Hopeful athletes should be more successful than less hopeful athletes because they have flexible strategies for achieving their

performance goals and an enduring belief that they will be successful. Indeed, research has supported the link between hope and athletic performance. For example, one study found that college track athletes who scored high on a measure of trait hope spent more time training and performed better in meets compared to athletes who scored lower in hope. This performance difference between high-hope and low-hope athletes remained even after accounting for differences in natural athletic ability as judged by coaches.⁸⁶

Research suggests that hope also has benefits for coping with the physical and emotional toll of sports. Specifically, a study on Swedish soccer players provided evidence that hope is inversely associated with athlete burnout. Burnout in athletes is characterized by high levels of stress, as well as emotional and physical exhaustion. Burned-out athletes also tend to harbor disappointment about not performing up to their standards but downplay or devalue their interest in their sports performance as a way of coping with this disappointment. In the study, hopeful athletes reported lower levels of stress and less emotional and physical exhaustion compared to less hopeful athletes. Hopeful soccer players also reported a greater sense that they were performing up to their abilities and did not devalue their athletic performance, compared to less hopeful soccer players.⁸⁷ Taken together, hope encourages athletic performance and persistence despite challenges and setbacks.

Hope Benefits Careers and Organizations

Hope has also been found to be an asset in the workplace, as several research studies have linked better work performance to career success.⁸⁸ For example, a pair of research studies polling more than 1,000 employees at hundreds of organizations across the Midwestern United States found that hopeful employees earned more positive performance evaluations than less hopeful employees.⁸⁹ A separate research study indicated that hopeful employees were better at generating solutions to work-related problems, in part, because they were adept at coming up with various high-quality strategies for accomplishing their work tasks.⁹⁰ Hopeful employees have also been found to be more likely to engage in proactive career behaviors such as networking and taking initiative on work tasks.⁹¹ Finally, research has linked hope with work performance at the level of leadership. In one study, for example, hopeful

leaders were found to have more profitable work units compared to less hopeful leaders.⁹² Similarly, a study found that hopeful CEOs of high-technology start-ups ran higher-performing firms and had better retention among their employees.⁹³

The benefits of hope in job/career achievement appear to be explained by how hopeful people approach their careers. Generally, research has shown that hopeful employees are more satisfied with, engaged in, and committed to their jobs.⁹⁴ Moreover, research suggests that hopeful people have more positive attitudes about career advancement. For example, Hirschi⁹⁵ found that hopeful employees were more engaged in coming up with and following strategies to meet career aspirations (i.e., career planning), firmer in their chosen career path (i.e., career decidedness), and more confident in their ability to be successful (i.e., career self-efficacy) compared to less hopeful employees. Interestingly, Hirschi found evidence that these positive career attitudes translated into positive work behaviors; hopeful employees embraced positive attitudes about their career success/advancement, which was in turn associated with being more proactive at work. Hope can also serve as a source of inspiration in highly stressful jobs. For example, a study on hospital nurses working with pediatric cancer patients found that hope was associated with comfort and confidence in providing palliative care.⁹⁶ Other research indicates that hopeful employees are less likely to experience elevated work-related stress and burnout.⁹⁷ Finally, one research study found that CEOs who scored high in hope were viewed by their employees as embodying a transformational leadership style.⁹⁸ Transformational leaders are those who inspire their team, push their team toward intellectual growth, are supportive and/or sensitive to their team's needs, and who team members look to emulate.⁹⁹

Taken together, hope is an asset in the workplace for working people and organizations. Hopeful employees are more satisfied with their jobs/careers and successful in them because they tend to approach their work with clear, flexible, and effective pathways for success, and the enduring belief that they will accomplish their career goals. Moreover, hopeful employees are more dedicated to their work, more highly motivated, and less likely to experience burnout. Organizations run by hopeful leaders tend to be higher performing and have higher employee retention, in part because hopeful leaders provide clear direction for, and support and inspire, their teams.

Hope Benefits Parenting

Parents have hope for their children's future as well as their ability to parent effectively. Hopeful parents have a clear idea of their parenting goals and work to create strategies to attain these goals. Moreover, hopeful parents have strong agency beliefs that they will accomplish their parenting goals.¹⁰⁰ Clear goals, flexible pathways, and agency beliefs help sustain positive parent-child relationships that research suggests begins in utero. Specifically, a research study assessing hope and parenting attitudes among pregnant women in Iran found that hopeful mothers had a stronger bond with and interacted more frequently by talking with their unborn child. Hopeful mothers also had more positive attitudes about becoming a mother and were more likely to behave in self-sacrificial ways such as maintaining a healthy diet for the benefit of their unborn child.¹⁰¹ Other research looking at the bond between parents and children beyond the womb indicates that hopeful parents tend to be more present and involved parents¹⁰² and have more warm and nurturing relationships with their children.¹⁰³

Research indicates that hopeful parents tend to be better adjusted to their roles, in part because hope helps them navigate parenting stressors. Flexible pathways help parents find alternate strategies for accomplishing parenting goals in difficult times, and agency beliefs help parents maintain motivation when times get stressful. Indeed, research generally indicates that hopeful parents are less likely to suffer from depression and anxiety, and less likely to experience high levels of parental stress.¹⁰⁴ Other research indicates that hopeful parents are more likely to use adaptive strategies for coping with parental stress.¹⁰⁵

Most of the research on the role of hope in managing parental stress comes from research on parents of special needs children. Compared to parents of children without disabilities, parents of children with mental or physical disabilities experience higher stress and more extreme challenges daily and are at greater risk of poor mental health outcomes such as anxiety and depression.¹⁰⁶ However, maintaining a hopeful mindset can help parents avoid poor mental health outcomes. For example, high levels of hope were tied to greater life satisfaction among parents of special needs¹⁰⁷ and autistic children.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, research suggests that hopeful parents of children with Autism and intellectual disabilities are less likely to experience depression compared to parents low in hope.¹⁰⁹ Research suggests that a hope-

ful mindset may help parents adapt to the uncertainty and unexpected changes that come with caring for a special needs child. For example, a study on parents of children diagnosed with Down syndrome found that hopeful parents were better able to adapt to uncertain situations in caring for their child, compared to less hopeful parents.¹¹⁰ Another study interviewed parents of children with serious medical conditions and found that hope inspired parents to seek support and coping resources.¹¹¹

Taken together, hope is an asset for parents. Hopeful parents have a clearer understanding of their parenting goals and are more confident about their ability to attain them. As a result, hopeful parents tend to be more involved in their children's lives and are more committed to maintaining a positive family life. Hope is also an asset for navigating parental stress and coping with family challenges. Having flexible pathways helps parents successfully navigate challenges and adapt to change, and thus hopeful parents experience less parental stress and are at less risk for poor mental health outcomes. The importance of hope is particularly apparent in parents of special needs children. Parents of special needs children experience more parental stress and are at greater risk for mental illness. However, hope helps parents adjust to the stress and uncertainty of caring for a special needs child. Moreover, hopeful parents can maintain positive attitudes despite the challenges of caring for a child with special needs and are more open to seeking out resources and support.

THE COMMUNITY BENEFITS OF HOPE

Thus far I have reviewed evidence that hope is associated with several personal benefits. People who maintain a hopeful mindset are psychologically and physically healthier, and more productive in various domains of life. Thus, inspiring hope in individuals should lead to healthier and more productive communities. Beyond these personal benefits, empirical research has looked at the benefits of hope for the community in terms of community service and action, as well as immigration and resolving conflicts between groups.

Hope and Community Service

A hopeful mindset could be an asset to a community. Research indicates that hopeful people are inclined to take an interest in helping other people.¹¹² One study, for

example, found that hopeful college students, compared to less hopeful college students, were generally more trusting, felt more compelled to contribute to their community, felt more supported by their community, and had more optimistic views of society's potential.¹¹³ Hope also contributes to people's success in viewing their lives as meaningful and purpose-driven,¹¹⁴ and the need for meaning in life has been found to motivate people to participate in community service and charitable giving.¹¹⁵ Thus, hopeful people embrace opportunities to work to strengthen their communities as a means of finding meaning or purpose in life.

Hope and Community Action

Hope can also be an adaptive mindset to combat community and societal problems. For example, a recent study looked at the role of hope in the context of homelessness, finding that homeless adults reported higher hope when they felt supported by their community and that people in their community were less judgmental about their status.¹¹⁶ A hopeful mindset, of course, would be an asset to someone homeless, out of work, or working their way out of poverty. Therefore, these findings suggest that creating community programs and resources that help people feel supported and respected despite their struggles with homelessness, unemployment, or poverty can help inspire the hope people need to improve their situation.

Other research has looked at hope in addressing societal issues such as climate change. This research has found that hopeful people are more inclined to participate in community action to address climate change. For example, hopeful high school students were more likely to participate in school sustainability activities and be more motivated to participate in activities meant to spread awareness about climate change. Moreover, this study looked at factors that inspired hope in students and found that being taught by supportive teachers who encouraged kids to have a solution-oriented mindset was a factor that predicted hope.¹¹⁷ Thus, teachers and community leaders could inspire community action by inspiring agency and pathway thinking to motivate citizens.

Hope, Immigration, and Conflict Resolution

Communities in the United States are becoming more diverse in terms of culture, religion, and ideology. This

diversity is in large part due to immigration. According to the Pew Research Center, the United States has more immigrants than any other country in the world.¹¹⁸ Therefore, it is important for the health of American communities that immigrants successfully adjust to the United States. People often emigrate with hopes that they or their families can have a better future, and research indicates that hope plays a significant role in the process of immigrants adapting to, learning about, and being successful in their new communities. For example, one research study examined the impact of an art-based after-school program called Project Hope meant to promote hope among refugee children 8–18 years old. In Project Hope, children discussed hope and were introduced to art techniques. They then used what they learned about hope and art to create art pieces that represented their hope for the future. One project involved the children collaborating to create “hope quilts” that, once completed, were then shared with the parents and the greater school community. Through interviews, the researchers determined that Project Hope helped refugee students and their families feel more hopeful about overcoming obstacles associated with adjusting to their new community, and helped build connections between refugee families and the greater school community.¹¹⁹

Of course, conflict can arise over cultural differences and opinions about community and societal issues. Hope has been found to play a role in how people view outgroups. For example, one study found that sharing hopeful stories helped people become more tolerant and supportive of people from different backgrounds.¹²⁰ Other research surveying Jewish-Israeli adults during the war in Gaza between Israelis and Palestinians found that people who were hopeful for peace were accepting of plans to provide humanitarian aid to innocent Palestinian citizens.¹²¹ Another study conducted in Northern Ireland in the context of “The Troubles,” the 30-year conflict between Catholic and Protestant ethno-nationalists, found that hope was predictive of forgiveness.¹²² Thus, hope for a peaceful future can inspire opposing groups to forgive and help one another despite their differences.

Hope has also been found to play a role in the conflict resolution process by encouraging conciliatory attitudes. For example, one study found that Jewish-Israeli adults who had hope for peace were more open to compromise and considering the conflict from the Palestinian perspective.¹²³ A separate study found that

the more hopeful people were for peace, the more they supported policies that involved their ingroup making concessions to end or reduce conflict.¹²⁴ Research suggests that leaders play a role in inspiring hope and conflict resolution. Specifically, a series of studies found that people were more supportive of conciliatory solutions to end the conflict after being exposed to speeches from their group's leader expressing hope

for peace.¹²⁵ Finally, there is evidence that the effects of hope on conflict resolution go both ways. Specifically, this research was conducted in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and found that ingroup members were more supportive of making compromises to end the conflict with an outgroup if the outgroup expressed hope for peace.¹²⁶





PART III

HOW CAN WE INCREASE HOPE?

Researchers have developed several promising interventions based on Snyder's hope theory. These interventions have been tested on a variety of groups and contexts and have been tested in the United States and around the world. In this section, I describe hope interventions and review their impact and utility.

HOPE INTERVENTIONS

Hope Therapy

Most hope interventions are based on a *Hope Therapy* methodology first tested by Cheavens and colleagues on a community sample of adults.¹²⁷ Hope Therapy is an eight-session small-group therapy program. People meet in groups of 4–10 people once per week for two hours to learn about hope theory as well as strategies for applying hope theory to their lives. Specifically, the first session typically involves an introduction to goals as well as the two types of thinking that make up the hopeful mindset: pathway thinking and agency thinking. The remaining sessions involve informational lectures, group discussions, activities, and homework assignments designed to help people develop pathway and agency thinking to effectively pursue important life goals.

Many of the activities in Hope Therapy are adapted from McDermott and Snyder's workbook titled *Making Hope Happen*, a self-help program based on hope theory.¹²⁸ A typical session is run by a training therapist and is split up into four segments. The first segment takes place in the first 30 minutes of each session and involves reviewing homework assigned the previous week. The second segment involves some kind of training activity designed to strengthen skills related to goals, pathway thinking, or agency thinking. For goals, the activity might instruct participants through the process of setting achievable and measurable goals. For pathways, the activity might walk participants

through the process of coming up with multiple pathways or strategies for accomplishing a specific goal. For agency thinking the activity might involve identifying sources of motivation for specific goals and learning how to maintain motivation despite challenges. The third segment is meant to get participants to apply lessons on hope-related skills from the second session to themselves. This might involve worksheets or small group discussions that get participants to articulate goals and plan pathways. It might also involve visualization exercises in which participants imagine following their designed pathway and achieving their goal or positive self-talk exercises in which participants repeat affirming statements that they will be successful in accomplishing their goals. Finally, the fourth segment is meant to introduce a homework assignment that is designed to give participants further practice applying the weekly hope-skill lesson to their lives.

The initial test of the Hope Therapy intervention provided evidence that it was successful in increasing hope, meaning in life, and self-esteem, and decreasing symptoms of depression and anxiety.¹²⁹ Since these initial findings, Hope Therapy has been found to have positive effects on several outcomes. For example, research using Hope Therapy in the context of marriage and family counseling has found that Hope Theory promoted well-being and resilience in divorced Iranian women¹³⁰ and helped reduce conflict and dissatisfaction in Iranian married couples.¹³¹ Research has also applied Hope Therapy to benefit people coping with chronic health conditions. For example, Hope Therapy was found to be effective in promoting mental health and

resilience among pregnant women,¹³² women with breast cancer,¹³³ rehabilitating cancer patients,¹³⁴ patients with type-II diabetes,¹³⁵ elderly cardiac patients,¹³⁶ multiple sclerosis patients and their family caregivers,¹³⁷ Parkinson disease patients,¹³⁸ and people susceptible to colorectal cancer based on genetic testing.¹³⁹

Brief Hope Interventions

Researchers have successfully adapted the multi-week structure of Hope Therapy to be shorter (e.g., four to five weekly sessions compared to eight weekly sessions). For example, two research studies tested five-week versions of Hope Therapy that focused on developing goals, pathways, and agency thinking. One of these studies was conducted on Iranian women experiencing marital conflict and found that a five-week version of Hope Therapy was effective in promoting marital satisfaction.¹⁴⁰ A separate study found that American middle school students aged 10–12 years old reported feeling more hopeful, happier, and had greater self-worth immediately after completing a five-week version of Hope Therapy and up to 18 months later.¹⁴¹

Another study developed and tested a four-week version of Hope Therapy where patients recovering from cancer completed two in-person sessions and two sessions over the telephone. The sessions were led by a trained facilitator who guided the patients through identifying attainable goals, realistic pathways for goals, and engaging in positive self-talk to optimize agency. This four-week version of Hope Therapy was found to be effective in increasing hope and lessening psychological (e.g., worry and sadness) and physical symptoms (e.g., lack of energy and pain) that typically afflict recovering cancer patients.¹⁴² Brief versions of Hope Therapy have also been combined with other interventions. Specifically, a six-session version of Hope Therapy was combined with Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, which involves meditation that teaches patients to focus on the present moment in a non-judgmental fashion, and a Biobehavioral Intervention, which involves education about one's response to stress, how to communicate needs to access relevant health information and social support, and how to engage in healthy behaviors. This combined approach was found to be effective in reducing the experience of negative emotions and anxiety in patients with gynecological cancers.¹⁴³

Other hope interventions have taken inspiration from Hope Therapy to create single-session workshops. For example, one research study adapted Hope Therapy to create a half-day workshop and tested its effectiveness on breast cancer patients. The half-day workshop was effective in increasing hopefulness. Moreover, some of the cancer patients maintained high levels of hope up to three months after the workshop. Other research has tested a 90-minute workshop version of Hope Therapy to promote academic motivation and achievement. Like Hope Therapy, the workshops were designed to educate groups of students about Snyder's hope theory and guide them through exercises to help them set realistic and measurable goals, activities to help them identify and rehearse pathways to pursuing goals, and visualizations of achieving goals to strengthen agency beliefs.¹⁴⁴ Research on this 90-minute hope workshop found that first-year college students who completed it reported feeling more hopeful and felt more confident in their ability to succeed in college immediately and one month after the workshop. They also found that students who felt hopeful after the workshop went on to earn higher grades in the semester following the hope workshop.¹⁴⁵

Finally, one study tested a very brief hope intervention that took around 15 minutes. First, college research participants were given a few minutes to bring to mind a desired goal and think about how they might build motivation to achieve their goal, the pathways they will take to achieve their goal, and how their experience of pursuing their goal might impact their future goal pursuits. Next, the research participants discussed their thoughts about their goals with a facilitator. The facilitator then gave the research participants a list of strategies to improve their goals, pathways, and agency thinking. At the end of the 15 minutes, the research participants completed a worksheet that guided them through applying the strategies to enhance goals, pathways, and agency thinking to the goal they imagined at the beginning of the session. The researchers tested the impact of the brief hope intervention on hope and physical pain tolerance, finding that college students reported greater hope and higher physical pain tolerance after the 15-minute hope intervention compared to a group of students who did not complete the hope intervention.¹⁴⁶

HOW TO SPREAD HOPE

The research on hope suggests that there are simple strategies beyond formal interventions to spread hope. Leaders, for example, can spread hope by inspiring confidence among their followers that a desired outcome will be achieved. Research in the workplace, for example, indicates that employees are more hopeful when they work for a hopeful boss.¹⁴⁷ Other research suggests that exposure to hopeful messages from leaders promotes hope among followers, particularly if people feel their leaders are credible and trustworthy.¹⁴⁸ Perhaps trustworthy leaders give people confidence that their hopeful visions will come to pass.

Hope can also be spread person-to-person in groups. Hope Therapy and other formal hope interventions are delivered in groups, in part, because communing with others helps with the spread of hope. In Hope Therapy, for example, participants share their goals and visions of hope with one another and talk through strategies for achieving them. People also help one another refine their goals, hold one another accountable, and encourage one another to believe that they will achieve them.¹⁴⁹ Sharing of hope can also bring people, and different groups of people, together or help a minority group connect with their community.

Earlier I discussed an arts-based hope intervention for children that helped refugee children and their families connect with their broader school community.¹⁵⁰ This program was successful because it allowed people to see that those who are different from them have similar hopes and dreams. People may be able to bond over these common hopes and work together to make sure that they are achievable for all. Bringing people together to discuss their hopes might go a long way toward bringing communities together to put aside their differences and work for the common good.

Organizations and programs may also spread hope by focusing on personal goals and/or providing training/support for setting goals and strategies for staying motivated and pursuing goals. Indeed, several research studies have found that programs that focus on goals inspire hope. One research study, for example, incorporated a focus on goals, motivation, and goal strategies

in a class for college student-athletes called Peak Performance. Peak Performance was a class meant to teach student-athletes how to perform up to their potential in their sports and life in general by giving them information about mental health and nutrition, strategies for solving problems and regulating emotions in and outside of their sports, and generally teaching them life skills.

Inspired by Snyder's hope theory, the researchers also included a focus on goals and created homework assignments and in-class activities designed to teach students and give them practice identifying measurable goals and realistic pathways for attaining goals. Student-athletes who completed the course reported higher hope, greater self-esteem, and more confidence than student-athletes who did not take the course. Moreover, coaches rated athletes in the Peak Performance class higher in leadership skills, confidence, the ability to play under pressure and handle adversity in their sport, and general achievement compared to athletes who did not take the course.¹⁵¹ Similarly, research has found that incorporating exercises/activities in cancer support groups¹⁵² and parenting support groups¹⁵³ that focus on goal setting, goal progress, and motivation is effective in promoting and restoring hope.

Other research has found that daily journaling about goals can help with the spread of hope. Specifically, college students were asked to journal once a day for seven days about their goals, including the importance of their goals, the progress they made toward their goals, the setbacks they experienced, and their plans for attaining their goals. Journaling about goals increased levels of hope among the students.¹⁵⁴ Thus, hope can be spread by an explicit focus on goals, motivation, and action even without knowledge of the hope theory or the guided instruction on goal setting, pathways, and agency thinking found in Hope Therapy. Helping people set attainable and measurable goals, guiding them through identifying flexible pathways to attaining goals, and helping them recognize and celebrate progress toward goals to build and affirm beliefs that they can be successful can go a long way in spreading hope and promoting human action and flourishing.



PART IV CONCLUSION

Taken together, hope is a goal-focused mindset and an expectation that one will achieve some desired outcome. People feel hopeful when they can see a path to attaining a goal and when they feel confident that they will achieve their goal. The empirical research indicates that hope is a psychological strength rather than a liability. Hopeful people are more driven and motivated to grow and achieve in a variety of life domains, and they tend to be overall healthier psychologically and physically. This is because hope is a resilience factor. Holding on to hope helps people to persist through adversity and overcome challenges.

Hope also helps people identify productive coping strategies and solutions to prevent negative psychological outcomes. Hope's benefits extend beyond the individual and impact communities by orienting

people toward community service and action and by encouraging them to find common ground to resolve conflict and push toward cooperation and community growth/achievement. There are formal interventions, like Hope Therapy, to promote hope. However, simple strategies inspired by hope theory can help with the spread of hope. For example, influential leaders can spread hope by sharing credible visions of hope and help create opportunities for citizens to share their hopes and dreams, find common ground, and support one another. Hope can also be spread by an explicit focus on goals, by creating opportunities to help people set attainable and measurable goals, by supporting their development of realistic pathways, and by bolstering their motivation and belief in their ability to realize their hopes.



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