

## Remaining Hopeful and Optimistic During Troubled Times

### Part II

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[Last month](#), I discussed maintaining realistic hope and optimism during challenging times marked by war, divisiveness, mistrust, and anger. This situation, fueled by the ongoing Hamas-Israeli conflict and its many ramifications, has continued unabated, leading some to question if a sense of optimism is warranted in the midst of such dire conditions.

In that column I referred to Admiral James Stockdale, a Prisoner of War in Vietnam for more than seven years who was subjected to repeated torture. Stockdale identified the POWs who fared most poorly in captivity as “optimists,” as the ones who “died of a broken heart” as their dreams of coming home in the near future were repeatedly denied. I emphasized that from my perspective Stockdale was referring to “unrealistic” rather than “realistic” optimists.

I cited the work of Heidi Grant, a social psychologist at Columbia University, who, in an article titled “[Be an Optimist without Being a Fool](#)” that was posted on hbr.org wrote, “Realistic optimists believe they will succeed, but also believe they have to *make success happen*—through things like effort, careful planning, persistence, and choosing the right strategies. They recognize the need for giving serious thought to how they will deal with obstacles. This preparation only increases their confidence in their own ability to get things done.”

Grant’s position that they “also believe they have to *make success happen*” is housed in a concept I have emphasized for years: “personal control.” A basic premise of the latter is that while we may not have control over many events in our life, what we have more control over than we realize is our *attitude* and *response* to these events. Attitude may be understood as a particular mindset that we possess. I believe that while changing a mindset may require much time and effort, it can be accomplished.

### Hope Is a Mindset

As I reported last month, the position that mindsets can be modified was captured in an article by Angela Haupt in a recent issue of *Time* magazine, titled: “5 Ways to Cultivate Hope When You Don’t Have Any.” Haupt wrote, “The antidote to any despair might be hope, experts say. It’s one of the most powerful—and essential—human mindsets, and possible to achieve

even when it feels out of reach.”

Haupt quoted Chan Hellman, founding director of the Hope Research Center at the University of Oklahoma. “Hope is a way of thinking. We know it can be taught; we know it can be nurtured. It’s not something you either have or don’t have. Being hopeful doesn’t mean engaging in wishful thinking or blind optimism. Rather, it’s the belief or the expectation that the future can be better, and that more importantly, we have the capacity to pursue that future. The opposite of hope, therefore, is not pessimism, but rather apathy, with its loss of motivation. And while wishing is passive, hope is about taking action.”

### **Identifying Guideposts for Taking Action**

Conceiving of hope and optimism not only as a mindset open to change but also involving “taking action” raises the following question for each of us: “What actions can I initiate that will nurture hope and optimism?” In seeking an answer to this question, Haupt interviewed several experts including Hellman and then suggested guideposts for initiating action. Before reviewing these guideposts, a cautionary note is warranted. Guideposts can offer a path or direction in our search for hope; whether or not we take the first steps on that path typically requires that we already possess even a small amount of hope and optimism that will motivate us to begin the journey.

One way of reminding ourselves that such a small amount exists is to consider past experiences. It is for this reason I typically requested the many children and adults I saw in therapy to recall at least one situation in which they (or, if I were speaking with parents, their children) were successful in achieving a goal. Some struggled initially to answer this question, but eventually almost all were able to identify not only a past success but also the positive emotions associated with that success. One obvious purpose in my asking the question was to highlight that although realistic hope and optimism might currently be buried under strong feelings of despair, it was important that they reflect on times during which their actions led to moments of accomplishment and joy. It was my hope that these positive memories could serve as a catalyst for future success.

The recommendations proposed by Haupt include:

*Give yourself permission to be hopeful.* One may wonder, “Why do I have to give myself permission to experience hope?” Unfortunately, some people for a variety of reasons do not allow hope to enter their lives. A common reason I have heard a number of times from patients is

captured in the remarks of a 40-year-old woman whom I saw in therapy. She said, “Each time I’ve tried to be more hopeful and optimistic, disappointment is the result. If anything, after each disappointment, I feel even more depressed and less hopeful. For me, being hopeful has increased my vulnerability to disappointment. I’m at the point of wondering if I should stop wishing for things I’ll probably never get.”

There are people who are cautioned in childhood “not to get their hopes up” and carry that message into adulthood. As a result, they are likely to retreat from taking actions that would reinforce hopefulness. To counteract that outlook, Haupt cited David Feldman, a professor of counseling at Santa Clara University in California, who observed, “The truth is whether or not we allow ourselves to hope, at some point we’re going to be disappointed. I don’t think the solution is never allowing ourselves to feel hopeful or giving up on hope altogether.”

When we give ourselves “permission to be hopeful,” we should be mindful that what we hope for is realistic and not permeated by a Pollyannish outlook. One important feature of a realistic approach is captured in Grant’s quote above about giving serious thought to how we will cope when obstacles arise. She observed that such preparation will increase confidence in a person’s ability to get things done. The importance of considering obstacles to reaching goals and what actions to take if these obstacles should emerge is advocated by psychologist Gabriele Oettingen in her book *Rethinking Positive Thinking*. In a similar vein, the Dalai Lama noted, “Optimism doesn’t mean that you are blind to the reality of the situation. It means that you remain motivated to seek a solution to whatever problems arise.”

*Set at least one meaningful goal.* Haupt cites the work of the late psychologist Charles Snyder, a renowned researcher who proposed a Theory of Hope that is based on three qualities hopeful people have in common. The first quality involves people thinking in a goal-oriented way, of having at least one goal at any time that is intrinsically meaningful. Feldman noted that it shouldn’t be something you *have* to do but rather *want* to do.

I am reminded of a middle-aged patient whose life was dominated by thoughts of what he felt he had to do, claiming he had little, if any, time to engage in something he wanted to do. As our work progressed, he learned that he could set aside a couple of hours each week to volunteer for a charity that focused on raising money to combat cancer, a disease that had taken the life of a younger brother. He experienced what he labeled a “greater emotional peace” when volunteering, and also he became more hopeful that someday a cure would be found for this

cancer.

*Brainstorm solutions.* A second key element of Snyder's theory has been called *pathways* or as Haupt wrote as "having the perception that there are plans or ways of getting from where you are to your goals." This is an essential component of hope and optimism. Having goals without knowing how to achieve these goals will intensify feelings of resignation and hopelessness.

Feldman observed that "people who are high in hope tend to generate lots of pathways—so if one doesn't work out, they have an alternative at the ready. If you're struggling to make a plan, or you keep being blocked, sit down with a pen and paper and give yourself an hour to brainstorm solutions."

*Call your support team.* The third component of Snyder's theory focuses on "agency." Snyder viewed agency as goal-directed energy or a determination to succeed. Agency is positioned as a motivational force that prompts one to act in accord with plans designed in the pathways phase. Feldman expressed that a significant way of enhancing agency, especially when one becomes stuck, is to turn to supportive people in your life, someone the late psychologist Julius Segal called a "charismatic adult" from whom we gather strength.

Feldman emphasized the importance of "having someone you care about tell you they believe in you." He suggested that we "make a list of our biggest supporters, so that when we're feeling unmotivated, we know exactly whom to call for a boost." In a similar fashion, in my clinical practice and workshops I ask, "What two or three people in your current life would you list as your charismatic adults, as people you would turn towards for advice, support, and encouragement?"

I have found that having even a couple of such people can make the difference between living in a world of despair and hopelessness or a world in which feelings of hope and optimism reign. Elie Wiesel, famed author, political activist, and Holocaust survivor, poignantly captured the power of others when he observed, "Just as despair can come to one only by other human beings, hope, too can be given to one only by other human beings."

Think about the people in your life you would turn towards for support. In addition, what people would turn towards you? I have often posited that to be resilient, not only do we require charismatic adults in our life, but we must also serve in that capacity for others—to be a charismatic adult adds purpose and meaning to our lives, qualities that nurture our own sense of

well-being and resilience.

*Tap into your imagination.* Hellman believes our imagination serves as “the instrument of hope. Let’s say you set a goal for the week, like applying for five jobs, helping your kid adjust to preschool, or volunteering for two hours. Spend a few minutes reflecting on or talking about what would happen if you achieved it. How does it impact you, or how would it benefit others, and who are those other people?”

Hellman continued, “You and I have this wonderful capacity to play a movie in our head. And when you can see yourself in the future, that is the very essence of hope.” A similar view of hope was advanced by physician Jonas Salk, developer of one of the first successful polio vaccines in 1955. He observed, “Hope lies in dreams, in imagination, and in the courage of those who dare to makes dreams into a reality.” Salk’s dreams and imagination about the polio vaccine resulted in the number of polio cases in the United States dropping from more than 45,000 a year to 910 by 1962. The worldwide impact was equally significant.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

I often spotlight in my writings and presentations that adopting a hopeful, optimistic outlook does not imply minimizing or denying the many problems that exist in our own lives and throughout the world. Rather, to allow hope to enter our lives strengthens our ability to cope more effectively with the many challenges we face. I think it’s worth repeating a quote by Hellman featured in last month’s article:

Being hopeful doesn’t mean engaging in wishful thinking or blind optimism. Rather, it’s the belief or the expectation that the future can be better, and that more importantly, we have the capacity to pursue that future. The opposite of hope, therefore, is not pessimism, but rather apathy, with its loss of motivation. And while wishing is passive, hope is about taking action.

To use the word hope once more, I hope all of you are able to apply several of the ideas and strategies described in this article to identify and implement goals that will enrich your life and the lives of others.

My warm wishes for a happy, healthy, and peaceful New Year.

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