



Being hopeful is good for you — and
psychologists' research is pinpointing ways
to foster the feeling.

BY KIRSTEN WEIR

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When Kelly James-Enger and her husband decided to adopt after years of infertility, the process was surprisingly smooth. But when they started trying to adopt a second child 18 months after they brought home their son, “everything that could go wrong did,” James-Enger says. In three years they suffered the heartbreak of five failed matches, including one in which they met their would-be baby before his mother changed her mind about placing him for adoption.

Despite the grief and the repeated disappointments, James-Enger never lost sight of her goal. “Hope was the only thing that kept me in the game,” she says.

Hope is associated with many positive outcomes, including greater happiness, better academic achievement and even lowered risk of death. It’s a necessary ingredient for getting through tough times, of course, but also for meeting everyday goals. Everyone benefits from having hope — and psychologists’ research suggests almost anyone can be taught to be more hopeful.

“Hope doesn’t relate to IQ or to income,” says psychologist Shane Lopez, PhD, a senior scientist at Gallup and author of the 2013 book “Making Hope Happen.” “Hope is an equal opportunity resource.”

What precisely is hope? Most psychologists who study the feeling favor the definition developed by the late Charles R. Snyder, PhD, a psychologist at the University of Kansas and a pioneer of hope research. His model of hope has three components: goals, agency and pathways. Put simply, agency is our ability to shape our lives — the belief that we can make things happen, and the motivation to reach a desired outcome. The pathways are how we get there — the routes and plans that allow us to achieve the goal, whether that’s adopting a child, finding a better job, surviving a hurricane or just losing a few pounds.

Unsurprisingly, optimism and hope are closely related. Even during the darkest days of her adoption struggle, the ever-optimistic James-Enger never stopped being hopeful. “I’m definitely a glass-half-full type — maybe even three-quarters full,” she says. That optimism paid off, and after three years she finally brought home her baby daughter. However, says Lopez, “optimism is only half of hope.” While optimism is a general feeling that good things will happen, hope tends to be focused on specific goals.

Hopefulness is also distinct from wishing. “Wishing is ubiquitous, but it can be kind of an escape from reality. Hope is different because it has to do with facing reality,” says Jon G. Allen, PhD, a senior staff psychologist at The Menninger

Clinic, a psychiatric hospital in Houston. “As I see it, hope is motivation to stay in the game.”

A big part of that motivation, he believes, comes from relationships with other people. Time and again, in his work with clinic patients, he’s seen how important social support is to having hope. “The antithesis of hope is feeling invisible and psychologically alone,” he says.

Randolph C. Arnau, PhD, a psychologist at the University of Southern Mississippi, agrees. While Snyder’s hope model has wide support, Arnau says he favors another measure of hope developed by nurse researcher Kaye Herth, dean emerita of Minnesota State University, Mankato. Like Snyder’s, Herth’s measure emphasizes setting goals and working toward them. But her model also contains a social support factor. “You have people you can depend on and people that are meaningful in your life,” Arnau explains. He believes social connections are fundamental to hopefulness.

Hope, health and happiness

Having hope feels good, but it’s also good for you. Arnau and colleagues have reported that hopeful people have a greater sense that life is meaningful (*International Journal of Existential Psychology & Psychotherapy*, 2010). Meanwhile Lopez and Matthew Gallagher, PhD, a psychologist at Boston University, found that hope is a strong predictor of positive emotions (*Journal of Positive Psychology*, 2009). Their research shows that hope and optimism are distinct from one another, but both are important for happiness and well-being, says Lopez, who has studied hope in millions of people through his work with the Gallup polls. While hopefulness alone doesn’t make a person happy, he says, it’s a necessary step on the path to contentment. “You have to knock down the hope domino to get to the happiness domino,” he says.

On the other side of that equation, Arnau and his colleagues have looked at hope’s connection to depression and anxiety. They surveyed more than 500 college students on measures of hope, depression and anxiety, then repeated the survey months later. They found students who expressed higher hope at the beginning of the study had lower measures of depression and anxiety one and two months later. The reverse was not true, however — symptoms of anxiety and depression had no effect on future levels of hope (*Journal of Personality*, 2007).

Having faith in your future may also make you more likely to succeed. John Maltby, PhD, a psychologist at Leicester University, and colleagues tracked college students over three years and found the more hopeful students went on to greater

academic success. Maltby discovered that hope was even better at predicting academic achievement than intelligence, personality or previous academic achievement (*Journal of Research in Personality*, 2010).

In a similar finding, Kevin L. Rand, PhD, a psychologist at Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis, and colleagues studied first-year law students and found that hope predicted their academic performance — but plain old optimism did not (*Journal of Research in Personality*, 2011). That makes sense given that hopeful thinking, unlike optimism, is more goal-oriented, says Rand. “Hope may be most beneficial in situations where a person actually has some control over the outcome, such as academic performance in law school.”

Having hope will continue to serve you well beyond the school years, of course. In a study published online in May, Lopez and colleagues compared the relationship between hope and productivity by analyzing 45 studies that looked at more than 11,000 employees across a variety of workplace conditions. They concluded that hope accounts for 14 percent of productivity in the workplace — more than intelligence, optimism or self-efficacy (*Journal of Positive Psychology*, 2013). “Basically a hopeful person does one day a week more work than a less hopeful person in a seven-day work week,” he says. “It’s quite a big chunk of the pie.”

In addition to helping you thrive, hope may help you survive. Stephen Stern, MD, of the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio, and colleagues studied hope and mortality in a sample of older Mexican- and European-Americans. Nearly 800 people age 64 to 79 completed a depression survey between 1992 and 1996. As of 1999, 29 percent of people classified as hopeless had died, compared with just 11 percent of the hopeful (*Psychosomatic Medicine*, 2001). Those with hope, Lopez says, tend to make better choices when it comes to health.

As with any human trait, some people tend to be more hopeful than others. People high on agreeableness and extraversion tend to have more hope, while those who are more neurotic generally have less, Arnau says. Hopeful people are also apt to be better at setting goals. “A high-hope person tends to have more goals, and is quicker to focus on another if they fail,” he says.

Lopez has found hopeful people tend to share some commonalities. When challenged by a crisis, less hopeful people tend to shut down. Hopeful people are more likely to

take action to help them cope. That was true for James-Enger, who did everything she could to reach her goal of expanding her family: running adoption ads, reaching out to her previous pastors and sending letters to everyone she knew in hopes of connecting with a birth mother. “I continued to reach out even when I didn’t feel like talking about it anymore,” she says. “If you want to have hope, you have to act like you have it.”

Yet hopeful people aren’t necessarily overtly cheerful types, nor are they naive Pollyannas. Instead, hopeful people often tend to be quite pragmatic. “If you haven’t been realistic in the past, you’ve had goal pursuits undermined time and time again. You become worn down and a little less hopeful,” Lopez explains.

A dose of hope

On the very low end of the hope spectrum are people who have lost the will to live. Research dating back decades has shown that hopelessness is even more closely associated with suicide

than is depression. “Hope is the bedrock of getting out of suicidal states,” says Allen at The Menninger Clinic.

Fortunately, he’s found most people can find some reason for hope, even those who have suffered extensive trauma. At the clinic, Allen leads psychoeducational sessions with patients who are desperate and often suicidal. His goal in those group sessions is not to replace fear and doubt with hope, he says,

but to help patients acknowledge that hope can exist alongside those negative emotions. “There’s tremendous diversity in what gives people hope,” he says. Patients often cite family members, past successes and faith in God as common sources of hope, he adds, but others have reported seeing hope in less obvious places: a sliver of light coming through the window, or the ability to be surprised. “What we need to do is tap into that diversity,” he says.

Shara Sand, PsyD, a clinical psychologist in New York City, helps depressed patients recover optimism and hope. Often that means reminding them of past successes — even relatively small achievements can make people feel capable and remind them of what they can accomplish. Because many patients are afraid to admit feelings of hopelessness, it’s important to ask them about hope directly so they can address it head on, she says. “Otherwise it goes underground and makes things worse.”

Even people who are not suffering from depression can use a fresh infusion of hope, and researchers have uncovered tangible ways to get it. One possible method: Get a good laugh. In one

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study, Arnau asked volunteers how hopeful they felt about stressors in their lives. Then some of the volunteers watched a humorous video while others watched a neutral film. Afterward, they filled out the hope survey again. "Hopefulness increased significantly after watching the humor video," he says (*Humor*, 2003). What's more, people who scored higher on a test of sense of humor had the greatest hope boost following the videos. More work needs to be done to explore whether humor actually helps people resolve stressful situations, Arnau says. But in the meantime, it doesn't hurt to look at the world with amusement.

Lopez describes three basic steps for building hope. The first is a process he calls "futurecasting" — envisioning a specific future goal in a way that makes it come alive. If you want to find your dream job, for example, he suggests taking pictures that represent the career you desire, and creating a collage to keep your goal front and center. "Really crystallize what you want your future to look like," he says.

The next step, Lopez says, is to work toward your goal — in other words, create the pathways that are central to Snyder's model of hope. For someone hoping to land a dream job, that might mean taking classes or revamping a resume.

The final step is planning for contingencies. Lopez has found most hopeful people tend to see multiple solutions to a problem, while the hopeless plan only for the best-case scenario and come up with just one or two pathways to their target, Lopez says. "You have to come up with many ways to overcome those obstacles."

People trying to recover hope in the face of trauma often need to build a fourth hope skill that Lopez calls "regoaling." One tragic example is among families with terminally ill children. After months or even years of hoping their child will recover from illness, parents must shift to a goal of helping their child live his or her remaining time comfortably, and die peacefully. Psychologists can help such families accept this new goal, essentially letting go of old dreams in order to create a new future for themselves.

Releasing one's dreams isn't easy, of course. But it's worth the effort to hang on to hope. Ultimately, we all need to be hopeful. "Many of the ancient religious texts reference faith, hope and love. Hope is an ancient virtue and a basic human quality," Lopez says. ■

Kirsten Weir is a writer in Minneapolis.

Want to nurture hope in your own life? Check out positive psychologist Shane Lopez's hope-boosting app, *My Hope Odyssey*, available for iPad and iPhone. Learn more at his website, www.hopemonger.com.

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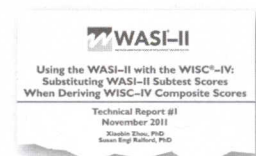
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