

Make
hope a
HABIT.

The High-Powered Benefits of Hope

Hope is an emotional force that points the imagination toward positive things. It energizes and mobilizes us, serving as a catalyst for action. Because it links directly to our confidence level, hope inspires us to aim higher, put forth more effort, and have more staying power.

Under the influence of hope we think in terms of possibilities, answers, and solutions, instead of limits, losses, and fears. This positive mental slant brings a valuable dimension to our problem-solving efforts. Hope also gives us resilience—bounce—the ability to recover from the punches life throws at us.

Psychological research shows that hopefulness helps people cope with difficult jobs, handle tragic illness, avoid depression, and achieve more academically. In fact, a study of almost 4,000 college students found that freshmen's level of hope predicted college grades more accurately than either their SAT scores or grade point averages in high school.

What Happens When Hope Fades

We ordinarily don't give much thought to how precious hopefulness really is until it slips away. It's an emotional asset that we just take for granted. But the profound value of hope becomes achingly clear when we start feeling the ravages of hopelessness.

Of course, all of us know what happens when hope notches down. We lose confidence. Our willpower starts to slip. We quit stretching, lower our sights, and start calculating fall-back positions. The energy drains out of us and we drift toward a "What's the use?" attitude. Our creative thinking shifts away from innovative angles we might play, and instead gets wasted on rich imaginings of things bleak, dark, and difficult.

Some of the most fascinating research on the power of hope has been conducted by Dr. Martin E. Seligman, psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania. He coined the term "learned helplessness" to describe what happens when people give up hope that their efforts can make a positive difference. This condition is marked by passivity, "giving in" to unpleasant conditions, and even despair. Taken to its extreme, hopelessness carries a person into the dangerous miseries of depression.

How to Deliberately Develop Hope

Most of us make the mistake of counting on hope to “just happen.” We don’t consider it a mental discipline that can be practiced. The schools didn’t teach us that this is a skill we should develop.

But hope is far too important to be left to chance. We need to work at it—consciously—so hopefulness becomes an active part of our everyday thinking process.

Basically hope is an act of mental focus. The positive spirit it produces comes when you manage your attention toward—

- What you can rather than cannot do
- What you do control rather than what you don’t
- How to best engage your strengths and resources
- The positive aspects of your life—e.g., what’s working
- Possibilities rather than limits

We need to practice hopefulness like the professional musician practices playing scales, or like the basketball star practices shooting baskets—daily...with a relentless discipline...and with a fierce determination to improve.

Shaping Your Future

*The Visionary's Handbook** states, “Events don’t write our future...it’s the response, not the events, that determine both our future and our satisfaction in the present with the future we expect.”

So give hope a fighting chance—turn it loose on your problems, wishes, and needs. Let it play a meaningful role in shaping your response to whatever life brings your way.

*By Watts Wacker & Jim Taylor, with Howard Means