

# Hope brings happiness, builds grit and gives life meaning. Here's how to cultivate it

December 14 2023, by Tharina Guse

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What is hope? In its simplest form, hope is about the future.

There are three necessary elements to hope: having a desire or a wish for something that is valuable, and the belief that it is possible to attain this wish, even when it seems uncertain. Then we have to trust that we have the resources, both internally and externally, to attain this important

desire, even when we experience setbacks along the way.

For example, I may hope that I will retire in a peaceful coastal town to pursue my hobby of painting (desire) and I believe that it is possible, although I will have to plan carefully (trust in internal resources). I also trust that I will settle in the community and make friends who share my interest in painting (trust in external resources), even though it may be difficult at first.

When we hope, we have a vision of imaginary futures and we anticipate specific outcomes. In doing so, we choose to focus on possible good things that may happen, even when faced by uncertainty.

Hope has several further dimensions. It involves our thoughts, because we assess the future and the likelihood that we will attain what we wish for. In the process we are taking in information and using it to reach our goals. Hope is also about experiencing [positive emotions](#). It can further be a motivational force, propelling us forward.

Hope may have a strong [spiritual element](#)—many, if not most, faiths place importance on having trust in a [higher power](#) that valuable outcomes may be attained. This trust can maintain hope in difficult times.

Hope also has a social dimension, in the sense that people may share hopes, and have hopes for others. Our sense of hope may further be influenced by our [context](#), and how others define what is possible and desirable in the future. This aspect of hope is important when we consider our expectations of national and international futures.

Overall, hope is a universal human phenomenon, studied from [several disciplines](#), for example, philosophy, theology, psychology, sociology and economics. In recent times, we are increasingly incorporating

insights from all these fields to understand the complex phenomenon of hope.

In studying hope, it has been measured in different ways. Most [psychological studies](#) have used existing questionnaires in the discipline.

## **How hope affects our lives**

How we think and feel about the future has an effect on us in the present.

Overall, hope is beneficial to our well-being. Hope encourages us to persist, even though we may be facing setbacks. Hopeful individuals are more likely to frame difficulties as challenges, rather than threats. This enables them to experience setbacks as less stressful and draining. For example, research indicates that hope is negatively associated with [depression](#) and [anxiety](#).

This means that people who hold higher levels of hope will be less likely to experience symptoms of depression and anxiety. Hope has been linked to many other positive outcomes, including higher levels of psychological well-being, life satisfaction, happiness, and meaning in life.

The importance of hope was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. Several [studies](#) found that people who had higher levels of hope were less likely to experience high levels of stress, depression and anxiety.

The research that I am involved in, the [International Hope Barometer Project](#), investigated hope, coping, stress, well-being and personal growth among participants from 11 countries during the pandemic years of 2020 and 2021.

Most reported moderate to high levels of hope, although at the same time they experienced moderate levels of perceived stress, characterized by feelings of unpredictability, being out of control, and overload. Hope and well-being were primarily related to being able to reframe negative events in a positive manner, accepting and actively coping with everyday challenges, and finding relief and comfort in religious faith and practice.

Hope is not only beneficial to us on an individual level, but to society at large. Hopeful people are more likely to engage in proactive behaviors that could benefit the community. In the context of global and local turmoil, collective hope is particularly important in maintaining momentum towards the future.

## **Learning to cultivate hope**

Hope can be strengthened and enhanced to some extent. Until now, most research has focused on how hope can be promoted in psychotherapeutic and medical settings. Several hope-focused interventions have been [developed](#) in these contexts, with promising results.

On a more general level, programs to strengthen hope among [young people](#) have been developed. One, referred to as [Positive Futures](#), developed in Switzerland, aims to assist youth to recognize and cultivate positive things, experiences and emotions in life and foster self-worth. It further aims to develop desirable long-term future scenarios and promote hope through voluntary and meaningful projects.

On a more practical level, I believe it is possible to nurture hope through attending to the way we appraise difficulties. Can we see them as challenges rather than insurmountable obstacles? We can also consciously draw on our individual and collective resources and actively look for the good things around us, within the chaos we may be experiencing.

Sharing our hopes with people close to us can further strengthen hope through highlighting shared goals and wishes for the future.

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