

Reflections on Hope & Recovery

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“The most important word in the English language is hope” – Eleanor Roosevelt

Although hope is defined as “a wish or desire accompanied by confident expectation of its fulfillment” (www.Dictionary.com) it remains a concept that defies simple definition. Hope begins as a space in our inner world for possibility. It involves an idea that we may be able to escape from some kind of personal imprisonment, addiction or obsession. This potential for liberation provides us with feelings of elevation and release which generate the energy needed to persevere through adversity and begin to make difficult changes.

For Diana, a young woman in her early twenties who had been caught in the grips of a serious eating disorder for over seven years, reaching out for help and coming for personal counselling was an act of hope. She didn't really think of it that way at the time, and saw it instead as an act of desperation. *“I thought I was the impossible case, the girl that would never recover, I thought I was stuck in hell forever”* Diana's obsession with food, weight and physical perfection had taken total control of her life. She was a prisoner to her eating disorder. She was physically ill, and had gradually let go of many of her friends and her dreams for the future. Her isolation was greatly increased by the lies she felt forced to tell as she sank deeper into her illness. Hope that she might begin liberating herself from the eating disorder motivated her to begin telling the truth about her feelings and her experience. *“I think for me hope was about telling the truth. I stopped lying about the disease and everything else the day I chose to go into recovery”*.

Hope and healing

Hope is an essential element of healing. Researchers have suggested that hope can improve prognosis in life threatening illness and can enhance the quality of life for all of us. Research also highlights that hope is generated in relationships. Concentration camp survivor and Nobel Peace Prize winning author, Elie Wiesel, observed that “just as despair can come to one another only from other human beings, hope, too, can be given to one only by other human beings.”¹ This idea was confirmed in the research of Dr. David Spiegel and colleagues, who found that involvement in supportive group therapy prolonged the lives of women with metastatic breast cancer an average of 18 months. Hope's healing power is clearly heightened in supportive relationships with others. Hope has been described as a “power resource” that buffers stress, aids in coping and allows a sense of freedom even during times of suffering².

For Diana, it was hope that propelled her to choose life, to reach out for help and accept support. It was hope that encouraged her to work toward developing a healthier relationship with her body, and to search for meaning in her life and in her experience of an eating disorder. *“I never thought I would say this – but the knowledge and insight about myself I have gotten because of my disease and my recovery process has given me a life that I doubt I would have ever had otherwise. I am not glad I was sick and I do not wish this hell on anyone else. But I can no longer say that I regret being sick because the process of recovery has shaped who I am today.”*

Hope groups

Over the past few years, I have had the privilege of facilitating groups specifically focused on the theme of hope. Our goal in these groups was to explore the meaning and value of hope in our lives, and to examine concrete ways to encourage it. We wanted to harness hope to help with healing. I had long ago studied hope as an important curative factor in group therapy but my actual experience in these groups surpassed any expectations I had beforehand.

I discovered early on in the group process that by merely shining a light on hope, it began to multiply. I looked forward to preparing for the group because it meant working with material that had a very positive focus. Being surrounded by other people's thoughts and words about hope seemed to inspire my own hope. The same held true for others, as group members began reporting that participation in the group gave them a positive feeling and focus for days afterward. Our sessions always seemed to pass by far too quickly and were often punctuated by laughter. Group members gradually began to share more stories and memories of their competence and courage.

Focusing on promise and possibility did not, however, prevent the return of despair and depression, and during the course of our groups we encountered these forces repeatedly. It was unhelpful to try to ignore or banish them from the room; allowing them to be present as another essential part of our human experience, and sharing these feelings with others seemed to make them easier to bear. Sarah, a loyal member of our hope group noted that, *“even though I became committed to working towards hope, I still had really bad days. It helped to be told that they would eventually pass, and it helped to know that I wasn't alone in my struggles. I learned that taking care of yourself makes the bad days a little better.”*

Involvement in these groups provided all of us with some very valuable information about hope and healing. Some of the ideas and strategies that we developed and shared follow:

10 ways to encourage your hope

- Practice Hope. Hope is found in stories. Read stories about hope; write stories about hope; search for hope in all of your experiences. Apply new interpretations to old stories. Looking at your own experience from the perspective of someone who has hope for you (e.g., a grandmother or a good friend) can be very uplifting. The telling and retelling of our stories helps us to develop perspective and allows us the opportunity to reinterpret them in a more compassionate way. Ask yourself what a hopeful person would do in this situation, and then try it.
- Hope thrives in community. Isolation breeds despair. Any kind of positive group involvement can help to encourage hope. Social groups, recreational groups, church groups, and support groups can all provide a forum for us to explore hope. Hope is encouraged when we realize that we are not alone, and when we are able to be honest about our own experiences with others who are respectful and listen without judgment. Strategies for dealing with problems can be shared but solutions are not a necessity. Our burdens may feel lighter simply by sharing them. When we are despairing, other community members can remember our strengths and hopes and reflect them back to us.

- Volunteer work or service to the community helps to build hope. Discovering that we have something of value to offer to others despite our troubles can remind us of our intrinsic worth.
- Humor encourages hope. Whenever we can look at life and see the absurdity of it and engage with others playfully, hope is present. Humor and laughter dramatically increase a sense of well-being and provide release from despair and pain.
- Problems and illness have a way of overshadowing all other parts of our identity. It is important to shift your focus on to who you are without your troubles.

In the recent film, “The Pianist”³, based on the true story of Holocaust survivor Wladyslaw Szpilman, we see that his passion for music is what keeps his hope alive in the midst of unbearable suffering. What is your passion? What activities gave you pleasure before you developed the eating disorder? What activities do you engage in that allow you to feel most in touch with yourself? If these are difficult to answer don’t interpret this as a sign of hopelessness. Instead, try to view it as an opportunity to explore and rediscover your interests. Try to be open to creative activities. Poetry, music, writing and the visual arts may offer a pathway back to hope.

- Thinking positively is an essential part of the practice of hope. Psychologist Martin Seligman points out that “finding temporary and specific causes of misfortune is the art of hope.”⁴ If we see our troubles as permanent and all pervasive it contributes to a sense of helplessness and despair. All-or-nothing thinking leads to seeing troubles in this over-inclusive way and needs to be challenged whenever possible. Optimism can be learned and practiced.
- Practice mindfulness. No matter what has happened in the past, we are always beginning anew. Remind yourself “Where there is breath there is life, and where there is life there is hope.” No matter what you are doing, try to be more emotionally present by focusing your attention on this moment. Yoga, meditation and prayer are a few of the ways one can increase mindfulness.
- Choose your friends and caregivers with great care. Surround yourself with people who encourage your hope. Do not share your hope with people who you know will discourage or devalue it. Ask people if they will be part of your “hope team.” Seek out positive people and search for resources to assist in your learning.
- Ronna Jevne, psychologist from Hope Foundation in Alberta proposes that just as we have a first aid kit for physical injuries, we should compile a hope kit for unexpected adversity. It should be small enough to carry and should contain reminders that encourage your hope. Collect and keep articles that can serve as tangible symbols of your hope⁵.
- Be aware of the power of your words. The words that we choose to describe our selves and our experiences have a real and lasting influence on how we feel. Choose them consciously and be certain to search for words that encourage hope.

Words of hope

Diana recently completed her work in individual counselling and has entered into a new and exciting

stage in her recovery process. She is reinvesting in her life and her dreams for the future. One of her dreams involves sharing her experience with others who have eating disorders and encouraging their belief in the possibility of recovery. In an open letter that she wrote to be shared with others who are contemplating recovery she closed by offering the following words of encouragement: *“I hope that somehow, some way, you will come to the realization that recovery is not impossible. The realization that you can and will, with determination and support from others, be able to get well. I wish you the strength and courage it takes to start living for real. I wish you a complete recovery.”*

Strategies specific to hope and eating disorders

- Practice hope by keeping a food diary and/or a journal. Read it over with the intention of finding indicators of hope.
- Look at every new development, no matter how small, as hopeful. For example, delaying a binge or purge is the first step in breaking the cycle.
- Look for groups where you can explore new avenues for hope. Even an online community can offer support and provide a forum for hopeful stories. Ensure that the website encourages hope and health, rather than getting and staying stuck in disordered eating and thinking.
- Remember how you came through difficult times. Search for recovery stories in groups, movies and books.
- Practice gratitude. Keep a record of a few things every day for which you are grateful, no matter how small. Gratitude encourages hope.
- Remember to breathe. Inhale hope, Exhale despair. That’s why we call it INSPIRATION!!

References

¹Wiesel, Elie. 1960. Night. New York: Bantam Books.

² Miller, J. 1992. Inspiring hope. In J. Miller (ed.). Coping and chronic illness: overcoming powerlessness (2nd ed.), p. 413-433.

³ Wladyslaw Szpilman. 1999. The Pianist: Surviving The Horror Of Warsaw, 1939-45. Picador.

⁴ Seligman, Martin. (1998) Learned Optimism - How to Change your Mind and your Life New York: Pocket Books.

⁵Jevne, Ronna (1999) The Hope Kit: First Aid for Uncertainty www.alberta.ca/HOPE/ronna/kit.htm.

Recommended Readings

Frankl, Victor. (1984) Man’s Search for Meaning New York: Pocket Books.

Yalom, Irvin. (1995) *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy* (Fourth Edition) New York: Basic Books.

** Check out other valuable articles and recommended readings of The University of Alberta Hope Foundation <http://www.ualberta.ca/HOPE>

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