

## The Complexities of Hope

Hope has been a topic of contemplation for humans for millennia. The Greek philosopher Aristotle observed that “Hope is a waking dream” and the Roman philosopher Cicero noted, “While there’s life, there’s hope.” Here in the 21st century, hope is sometimes treated as a panacea and sometimes viewed as an object of scorn. Let’s investigate the complexities of hope and see what we uncover.

### False hope and true hope

One of the complexities involving hope is that there is false hope and true hope. According to Jerry Groopman, author of the book, *The Anatomy of Hope*, “False hope does not recognize the risks and dangers that true hope does. False hope can lead to intemperate choices and flawed decision making.” True hope, in contrast, can help us to take action towards making things better. With genuine hopefulness, we can look at a situation clearly and be inspired to go on trying.

If there’s virtually no chance that a desired outcome will occur, it’s false hope to pretend that such an outcome is likely. True hope does not involve pretending.

In some situations, false hope is generated by the withholding of important information. While such withholding can be done in an attempt to be kind, in the end it can be cruel to falsely get someone’s hopes up.

True hope can be viewed as an attitude or approach. We can choose to focus on aiming for a positive outcome while still having an awareness of the troubles that may arise. The saying “hope for the best, expect the worst” encapsulates that you can try for the best possible outcome while still being prepared for the worst possible result. Having true hope doesn’t mean that you’re absolutely counting on something. Rather you’re recognizing that you get to choose what to focus on, and you’re focusing your energies on a desired outcome.

### Specific hope versus general hope

Another way to categorize hope is as specific or general. With specific hope, you’re focused on a very particular outcome, whereas general hope is broader. For example, suppose you’re looking for a house to purchase. If you completely focus on one particular house and have all of your hopes placed on it, you can be setting yourself up for enormous disappointment, as there can be a number of factors in the home-buying process that you can’t control. If, instead, you focus your hope on a broader goal, such as finding a house in a convenient neighborhood, that type of hope can help you to get through the search process successfully.

Specific hope can also be problematic when it comes to relationships. Say you’re at the beginning of a new romance and you find yourself hoping that it will work out and that you’ll be together for many years. Specific hope like this can cloud your thinking and make it hard to see if you two would really be a suitable match. In this situation, having general hope would mean that you’re hoping to eventually have a lasting romantic partnership and you’re willing to wait and see for a while whether this particular possibility is promising. One way to look at it is that general hope tends to involve more patience than does specific hope.

### Hope and action

Hope can be detrimental if it is treated as a complete substitute for action. In most cases, just wishing for things to happen won’t be effective. We can have hope and take suitable actions to increase the chances of a desired outcome. Hope and action can complement one another.

In some cases, such as when a long-distance friend or relative is ill, there might not be much action that we can directly take to help, but we can try to encourage hopefulness by sending them good wishes. Knowing that someone is sending good wishes can buoy the spirits of the recipient, which can help them to take whatever actions might be needed to deal with the illness.

### **Hope and the past**

Another complexity about hope involves the past. When we find ourselves wishing that something didn't happen, we're in a sense experiencing hope about the past. This can be a natural initial reaction in some difficult situations, but if we continue to dwell on such a wish indefinitely, it can be hard to move forward.

It can also be possible to be hopeful about something that's already been determined but that we haven't learned the outcome of yet. To give a trivial example, if our favorite sports team played earlier in the day and we haven't heard the score yet, we may be hoping that they won, even though the result has already been determined. In such a case, what we're calling hope is more of an expression of our preference than it is anything else. It can be another way to say, "I'll be glad if I hear they won."

Similarly, it's common to say something like "I hope you had a good weekend" to a friend or colleague. The weekend is over and was good, bad or so-so, but what's being conveyed may be "I'd be happy to hear that you enjoyed your weekend." So sometimes when we express hope with respect to the past, we're really just expressing our preferences regarding what might have happened.

### **Key times for hope**

While hope can be beneficial in our day-to-day lives, as we handle the usual kinds of challenges that arise, hope can be crucial at certain times in our lives. When we deal with a serious illness or injury, we can find that we really need hope. When we're dealing with a profound loss (such as the end of a marriage or the death of a loved one), we can also find ourselves in need of hope. At such times, it may be hard to believe that things can get better. Glimmers of hope, often provided by friends or relatives, can help us to begin to move forward.

It's also worth noting that having hope when someone is critically ill doesn't just refer to hoping for a complete cure. Hope can refer to the possibility of one more visit with a relative or one more phone call with a friend. It can refer to the opportunity for one more meaningful experience.

### **Hope as a tool**

Hope can be viewed as a tool that's useful when we're trying to be persistent. With hope, we can stay the course even when that's quite difficult. Hope can keep us from giving up too soon. It's often the case that giving up hope means giving up, period.

When we're genuinely hopeful, we're able to see what might really be possible. This doesn't guarantee anything. But it can help us to focus our attention and energies on actions that may turn out to be beneficial.

### **Cultivating hope**

In *The Anatomy of Hope*, Groopman writes, "Hope can arrive only when you recognize that there are real options and that you have genuine choices. Hope can flourish only when you believe that what you do can make a difference, that your actions can bring a future different from the present." This statement reminds us that hope is something that we can cultivate. Genuine hope can be cultivated in a myriad of ways and we can each figure out what works best for us. Here are just a few examples of ways in which we can encourage hope to flourish: having conversations with supportive friends and relatives;

participating in groups that provide support; reading books that inspire us and watching films that encourage us; trying new things that seem truly promising.

As we've seen, hope can be genuine or false and it can be general or specific. Hope can effectively complement action or in some cases it can be a poor substitute for taking action. Hope can help us to get through terrible times. No matter what the eventual outcome of a situation, genuine hope can be used as a tool that helps us to persevere, to keep going, to face another day.

— *Mary Jablonski*