

# The Difference Between Hope and Optimism

For starters, hope is better.

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During the Vietnam war, a U.S. Navy vice admiral who was held for more than seven years in a North Vietnamese prison noticed a surprising trend among his fellow inmates. Some of them survived the appalling conditions; others didn't. Those who didn't tended to be the most optimistic of the group. As the vice admiral, James Stockdale, later told the business author Jim Collins, "They were the ones who said, 'We're going to be out by Christmas.' And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go ... And Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart."

Among my circle of acquaintances, I have noticed a less dire version of this pattern over the past year and a half, as COVID-19 has slowly transformed from a temporary inconvenience into a new way of life. Those who have struggled the most have been the optimists always predicting a return to normality, only to be disappointed as the pandemic drags on. Some of the people who have done the best have been downright pessimistic about the outside world, but they've paid less attention to external circumstances and focused more on what they could do to persevere.

There's a word for believing you can make things better without distorting reality: not *optimism*, but *hope*. Just as Stockdale found—and I've found in a less dramatic way during the pandemic—optimism often isn't the best way to improve your well-being. The research shows that hope is a far more potent force. We can all get better at it as we work toward recovering from the pandemic, and benefit from our improved skill for the rest of our lives.

People tend to use *hope* and *optimism* as synonyms, but that isn't accurate. In one 2004 paper in the *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, two psychologists used survey data to parse the two concepts. They determined that "hope focuses more directly on the personal attainment of specific goals, whereas optimism focuses more broadly on the expected quality of future outcomes in general." In other words, optimism is the belief that things will

turn out all right; hope makes no such assumption but is a conviction that one can act to make things better in some way.

Hope and optimism can go together, but they don't have to. You can be a hopeless optimist who feels personally helpless but assumes that everything will turn out all right. You can be a hopeful pessimist who makes negative predictions about the future but has confidence that you can improve things in your life and others'.

Much of the research that has linked optimism and human thriving collapses the distinctions between optimism and hope. But netting out the two concepts tends to show different levels of benefit. One study in the journal *Psychological Reports* showed that although both optimism and hope drive down the likelihood of illness, hope has more power than optimism in doing so.

Given that hope involves personal agency, its links to individual success shouldn't come as a surprise. In a report in *The Journal of Positive Psychology* in 2013, researchers defining hope as “having the will and finding the way” found that high-hope employees are 28 percent more likely to be successful at work and 44 percent more likely to enjoy good health and well-being. A multiyear study of students from two universities in the United Kingdom found that hope, measured in response to self-rated measures such as “I energetically pursue my goals,” predicted academic achievement better than intelligence, personality, or even prior achievement.

Hope is more than a “nice to have” for well-being; lacking it is disastrous. In a 2001 study of older Mexican and European Americans who took a survey between 1992 and 1996, 29 percent of those whom researchers classified as “hopeless” based on their survey answers had died by 1999, versus 11 percent of those who were hopeful—even after correcting for age and self-rated health status.

Some might argue that having hope is mostly a matter of luck—you are born with it. This might be partially true for optimism: One study finds it is 36 percent genetic. Whether hope has a genetic link or not (I have not seen any measure of this), most philosophical and religious traditions regard it as an active choice, and even a commandment. Indeed, it is a theological virtue in Christianity: It implies voluntary action, not just happy prediction.

The Catholic nun and mystic Teresa of Avila believed that hope comes from will and commitment. As she poetically wrote in the 16th century, “Hope, O my soul, hope ... the more you struggle, the more you prove the love that you bear

your God, and the more you will rejoice one day with your Beloved, in a happiness and rapture that can never end.” Religious or not, we can all learn from Teresa’s assessment and commit to increasing our hope for a better life and future by taking the following steps.

### 1. Imagine a better future, and detail what makes it so.

When you feel a bit hopeless, start changing your outlook. Say, for example, that the city you live in and love is struggling with the problem of homelessness, and more and more of your neighbors are finding themselves without shelter. You could easily conclude that the situation is hopeless, but you can do more for your neighbors’ happiness—and your own—if you instead imagine a city where fewer people are resorting to living on the street and everyone has a better quality of life.

Rather than basking in the glow of a fictitious city and leaving it at that, make a list of the specific elements that will have improved; for example, more affordable housing, better public policy and regulation, or more attention to substance abuse and mental-health needs.

### 2. Envision yourself taking action.

If you leave things at Step 1 and thus convince yourself that better times lie ahead, you will have engaged in optimism, but not yet hope. Envisioning a better future will not, on its own, make it so. But it can help the world when it changes our personal behavior from complaint to action. Thus, the second step in this exercise is to imagine yourself helping in some plausible way to bring about a better future, albeit at the micro level.

Continuing with the example above, envision yourself volunteering at a soup kitchen one day a week, advocating for better policies in your city’s government, or making the plight of people experiencing homelessness more visible in your community. Avoid illusions of being the invincible savior; instead, imagine helping one real person, convincing one policy maker, or increasing the compassion of one fellow citizen.

Now, armed with hope, you can move on to the most important step of all.

### 3. Act.

Take your grand vision of improvement and humble ambition to be part of it in a specific way and execute accordingly. Follow through on your ideas to help at the person-to-person level. I recommend trying two or three, because your first idea could likely prove unworkable or unrealistic.

Your specific action might feel like an exercise in futility because it is so small. This is the voice of hopelessness inside your head. Combat it with the words of Thérèse of Lisieux, the young 19th-century French nun who advocated the

“Little Way.” She emphasized that the magnitude of an act was not only its worldly impact but the love with which you undertake it. Your little way will change your heart and perhaps infect the hearts of others, especially when they see the effect that practicing hope and love has on you.

While I am quoting nuns named Teresa, perhaps Mother Teresa summarizes it best: “Don’t look for big things, just do small things with great love.”

In 1891, Emily Dickinson wrote that hope is something unearned that we can always count on: “‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers – / That perches in the soul – / And sings the tune without the words – / And never stops – at all –”

Dickinson’s sentiment is beautiful, but not quite accurate. For some lucky souls, optimism shows up uninvited and makes a nest. But hope requires that we make a nest for it, and put out some tasty birdseed too. If we work for it and it indeed alights in our hearts, there’s no sweeter song in a dissonant world.