

HOPE

This is one of a series of occasional papers by The Dilenschneider Group to bring clients and friends a different perspective. We hope you find it of interest.

HOPE

What reader of this Red Book has never been faced with a challenge or had to address a problem?

What follows is about a quality—hope—that, if embraced, might just be able to help you address your situation.

At age 21, the astrophysicist Stephen Hawking was diagnosed with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) and given two years to live. He sank into depression, as anyone might. But when he saw that his inevitable decline was not going to be as precipitous as predicted, he rallied.

Over half a century later, almost entirely paralyzed and able to speak only through a voice synthesizer, he did not succumb to bitterness. “After my expectations had been reduced to zero, every new day became a bonus and I began to appreciate everything I did have.” He added, “While there’s life there’s hope,” quoting the Greek poet Theocritus, who said it more than 2,200 years ago.

The psychiatrist Viktor Frankl faced daunting conditions of another kind. He spent nearly three years in Nazi concentration camps struggling to survive, cultivating hope, and helping others to do the same. In *Man’s Search for Meaning*, he explains that while hope brought with it no guarantees, its disappearance could be fatal. Those who lost hope lost the will to live.

Who can forget Lou Gehrig, “the Iron Horse” who played 2,130 consecutive games and hit 493 homeruns for the Yankees? After he was diagnosed with ALS, he stood at home plate with Hall of Famers Babe Ruth and Bill Dickey looking on and told 50,000 fans, “For the past two weeks you have been reading about the bad break I got. Yet today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of this earth.”

Nelson Mandela never lost hope during his 27 years in what he described as “the harshest, most iron-fisted outpost in the South African penal system. To him, hope was a “powerful weapon.”

In Lourdes, France, tens of thousands go every day with hope in their hearts. So far the Church has confirmed 70 “miracles” and more than 7,000 have found their difficulties cleared up. There is no medical explanation – Lourdes is all based on faith.

But maintaining hope is not always easy. Like the rainbow, one of its most popular symbols, hope can evaporate in front of your eyes. Like a flame it can flicker out.

THE BENEFITS OF HOPE

How powerful is hope? Hope is strong enough to vanquish fear and defeat apathy. It arms us against despair and lends us the courage to kick through obstacles. When disease threatens or tragedy strikes, when failure, grief, fear or injustice warp our daily experience, when the outlook is bleak and the night is long, hope counters calamity.

It also correlates with success in virtually every sphere of life.

Research confirms that hopeful people are happier, less lonely and more effective at reaching their goals than their gloomier peers. Students who rate “high hope” on psychological tests earn better grades than their classmates. Data shows hopeful athletes are more competitive. A similar pattern shows up in the workplace, where individuals rich in hope are more productive, more engaged, more resilient, more creative, less likely to experience burnout and far less likely to call in sick.

Hope even appears to pay a health dividend.

Hopeful people release more endorphins and have a greater tolerance for pain. They tend to choose a more nutritious diet, and, according to a study by the Harvard School of Public Health, are less prone to hypertension, diabetes, and respiratory tract infections. Moreover, hope strengthens the immune system, so when hopeful people do contract an illness or suffer an injury, they recover more rapidly. “For all my patients, hope, true hope, has proved as important as any medication I might prescribe or any procedure I might perform,” writes Dr. Jerome Groopman in *The Anatomy of Hope*. “I see hope as the very heart of healing.”

WHAT IS HOPE?

Hope doesn't deliver miracle cures, overnight success, holes-in-one, inside straights or lottery jackpots. It is not wishful thinking, which only causes us to fulfill our dreams more slowly than might otherwise be the case. And it is not denial or delusion. Nor is hope the same as optimism. Optimism is a matter of attitude, of positive thinking. It foresees a better future and confidently looks forward to realizing its aspirations. It believes that all will be well, that the best is yet to be.

Hope isn't so sure. It is rooted in reality. It knows the odds and forges ahead anyway, convinced that change is, if not probable, at least feasible. Hope is a desire, a wish, an expectation. But most of all, hope is a catalyst for action and a weapon in the war against futility.

FINDING HOPE: THREE STEPS

“Hope is a state of mind, not a state of the world,” said Vaclav Havel, the playwright and activist who bounced in and out of jail for years before becoming president of Czechoslovakia and then the Czech Republic. “Either we have hope within us, or we don't.” If you happen to be someone who lacks a deep internal wellspring of hope, Havel's statement might sound like bad news. Fortunately, there are steps you can take to fill a reservoir of hope:

CREATE A POSITIVE VISION OF THE FUTURE.

“I dwell in possibility,” wrote Emily Dickinson. Allow yourself to do the same, to luxuriate in the concept of a rewarding future. Don't let caution or skepticism keep you from visualizing a happier family, a healthier body, or a better world. There is a key corollary here: What you say publicly and what you say privately to your line managers must be consistent. What you discuss publicly has to be accurate and consistent with what you are telling your key managers. If you violate this rule, the inconsistency will find its way into conversations with others and, in particular, with the media. That undermines in the most fundamental sense anything else you might be doing.

Is there one tiny reason to feel hopeful? Focus on that. The surge of hope that you may notice will be accompanied by a chemical shift in your brain, the advantages of which will ripple out into the rest of your life.

When Viktor Frankl was in Auschwitz, he sought comfort in imaginary conversations with his wife, who had been taken to another camp. On one occasion, though, mired in the horror of his surroundings, his thoughts turned in a surprising direction. “Suddenly I saw myself standing on the platform of a well-lit, warm and pleasant lecture room . . . giving a lecture on the psychology of the concentration camp!” After he was liberated, Frankl learned that his wife had been killed. Their longed-for reunion did not materialize. Not all hopes do. He did, however, lecture all over the world. That image, that ambition, buoyed his hopes and eventually became his reality.

Another iconic figure is Christopher Reeve, who starred in Superman but was rendered quadriplegic in a horseback riding accident. Reeve dedicated himself to a search for a cure. Although he did not succeed in that, he regained limited movement, drew worldwide attention to the possibility of healing spinal cord injuries and extended the boundaries of medical knowledge, a not inconsiderable achievement. “Once you choose hope,” he said, “anything is possible.”

TAKE ACTION. Sloth, says Pope Francis, is an enemy of hope. Doing nothing, procrastinating or simply being passive drives a dreadful message into your unconscious: Nothing will ever change. That is the abandonment of hope.

Taking action has the opposite effect. It keeps things in motion. What should you do? Make a phone call; arrange an appointment; write a list and do the hardest task on that list (you’ll feel more hopeful instantly); do the easiest. Any step you take that brings you closer to your goal is a step in the right direction.

GATHER SOCIAL SUPPORT. It doesn’t matter whether you are battling a personal demon or fighting for a cause that concerns society at large. Either way, getting backup from others is essential. Social connection reduces anxiety, lessens the damage caused by trauma and stress, amplifies happiness and increases hope. You can’t do without it.

So engage with others. Enlist the aid of friends and family. Seek out role models, mentors, and allies – the more the better. And consider aligning with a group, especially if your network is shrinking or feels insufficient. There are neighborhood associations, political groups, business

councils, environmental organizations, runners’ clubs, book clubs and alumni clubs, not to mention support groups for every diagnosis, habit, and emotion known to mankind.

But be sure to steer clear of people who demoralize or depress you, even if they claim to have the best of intentions. When you are laboring to tamp down your fears and goad yourself into action, naysayers are not consoling. They are toxic. Avoid them.

And remember that personal trainers, therapists and life coaches make a living for a reason. They can arm you against adversity and help you find hope when you need it the most.

THREE INSPIRING BOOKS

- **The Anatomy of Hope: How People Prevail in the Face of Illness** by Jerome Groopman, M.D. He explores hope in a medical context, both as a physician and as a patient. A fascinating, encouraging book.
- **Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities** by Rebecca Solnit. “Hope is an ax you break down doors with in an emergency,” she writes. “Hope will shove you out the door.” Originally published in 2004, this book illuminates the nexus of hope, social change and political activism.
- **The Impossible Will Take a Little While: Perseverance and Hope in Troubled Times**, edited by Paul Rogat Loeb. An anthology of essays by writers as varied as Diane Ackerman, Marian Wright Edelman, Naomi Shihab Bye, Pablo Neruda, Bill McKibben, and Arundhati Roy.

“Hope” is the latest in a series of “Little Red Books” published periodically for our clients and friends. These books examine critical issues in a concise, readable, insightful, and informative manner. We hope our readers find them at once relevant and of value. Previous titles have included:

- “Why Community Service Matters”
- “Have You Done Enough?”
- “The Underappreciated Art of Saying Thank You”
- “The Age of Apology”
- “Managing Uncertainty”
- “C.I.V.I.L.I.T.Y.”
- “The Lost Art of Listening”
- “The Art of Disagreement”
- “Why Accountability Matters”
- “Kindness”
- “A Quarter Century (1991-2016)—The Words & The Deeds”

If you would like additional copies of this or previously issued booklets, please contact Laura Garrison at lgarrison@dgi-nyc.com.

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