

Nurturing Hope in Difficult Times

by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

“Hope is the pillar that holds up the world.” — Pliny the Elder

The caller to the Center for Loss asked a question that is on the hearts of many right now: “Are we going to get through this?”

It became obvious as the conversation continued that she was experiencing feelings of grief and in search of borrowing some much-needed hope. As I hung up the phone after 20 minutes, I found myself yearning to write about hope, because, especially during difficult times like these, it is indeed the pillar that holds up the world.

As director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition, I advocate for our human need to acknowledge and embrace our darker emotions. Our culture usually isn’t so good at honoring loss and supporting others who are grieving, even though they are essential parts of our lives. Instead, to our detriment, we tend to focus almost exclusively on the happy and the distracting and the fun.

It’s a question of balance. We need both, you see. We need to honor the light and the dark, the happy and the sad—and everything in between—because all of it belongs. All of it is authentic. And whatever is authentic is normal and necessary.

Usually we’re out of balance because we choose to shine our awareness only on the “good stuff.” But right now, in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, we’re at risk for the balance tipping too far the other way, in the direction of fear and despair.

Yes, in difficult times, we must remember to hope.

What is hope? It’s an expectation of a good that is yet to be. It is an inner knowing that the future holds positive things. It is trust that no matter the current circumstances, the days to come will reveal happiness. It’s forward-looking—yet experienced in the now.

Like mourning, nurturing hope is active. It’s something we can *do*. Let’s look at what we can do to embrace hope even as we are experiencing the many losses caused by

this pandemic.

Practice mindfulness

As I write this, most of us in North America are sheltering in place. Though our normal lives have been completely disrupted and we may be experiencing very real personal losses (sick friends and family members, financial jeopardy, lost connections with loved ones, to name just a few), many of us are also, in this moment, safe and comfortable.

Practicing mindfulness means learning to be present to our immediate surroundings *right now*. As I write this, the sun peeks out from billowy clouds in a denim-blue sky. I see spring crocuses blooming. My dogs sleep at my feet. Whenever I am mindful of the present moment, I find gratitude, and gratitude helps me access hope, which we might think of as gratitude for what is to come.

Being mindful in the now also helps me build relationships with the people I care about. In the now I can share quality time with my wife, and even though I can't visit them in person, I can also spend time each day on video calls with my children and friends. The more I can use this time to strengthen relationships with my dear ones, the more hope I will have for the future gatherings we will share.

Relinquish the illusion of control

There's a fine line between a) informing ourselves about the pandemic and steps we can take to keep ourselves and others safe, and b) overconsuming information (and misinformation), causing undue stress and even despair.

In this information age, we have limitless content at our fingertips. We could read, watch, and listen to new information about COVID-19 for many hours a day and still never be "caught up." It makes sense that we might be tempted to overconsume information in an effort to feel in control of what is happening. The trouble is, we as individuals can't control this epidemic, and we can't even fully control what happens to us and our loved ones.

Relinquishing the illusion of control can lessen our anxiety and help us to build trust in our own capacity to cope with whatever happens. If we work on mindfulness, we don't have to obsess and worry. Instead, we can learn to be OK with our lack of control and trust in our own resilience. When tomorrow comes, we will handle what comes tomorrow. Today we are only responsible for today.

Build hope

If we believe that our futures will include moments of joy, love, and meaning, we already have within us that spark of hope. We can grow that spark into a flame by intentionally building hope into each day.

How do we build hope during difficult times? Here are a few ways:

- By taking part in activities we care about to the extent that we can while sheltering in place
- By engaging in spiritual practices
- By making a collage of words or pictures that symbolize hope in our mind and heart
- By intentionally imagining the futures we desire
- By making future plans that excite us and that we know we will enjoy
- By helping others
- By staying in close contact with the people we care about, ideally through video and phone calls
- By taking care of our bodies, our minds, our hearts, our social connections, and our souls

Consciously Choose Hope

Please understand that hope is not something that will just passively float into your life. Instead, hope will enter when you create ways to consciously bring it into your day. Despite these challenging times, the door you open to hope each and every day will dramatically influence the quality of your life.

Consciously choosing hope means deliberately focusing on it—paying attention to it, inviting it into a given moment, and letting yourself feel it as it enters. Be creative with how you give attention to hope and invite it in. Moment by moment, choose hope over fear. Choose hope instead of despair. If you start feeling hopeless, act with intention to bring hope to that moment.

If hope feels out of reach right now, consider borrowing a little to get you through. When you cannot muster the energy to cultivate it yourself, it's possible to receive hope from others. It's appropriate in times like these to turn to people who have

hope to lend.

How do you know someone is hope-filled? Look for friends and family members who have a hopeful outlook on life. They are people who have a positive energy when they are in your presence, and they make you smile when you simply hear their voice. They are also usually caring, nonjudgmental listeners. The energy they radiate can anchor you right now. Remember—hope is a renewable resource. Borrow it now, and know that in the future, when the time is right, you can pay it forward to someone else in need.

In the words of Victor Frankl, I remind you, “Everything can be taken away from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.” As you choose your own way during these challenging times, I invite you to nurture hope and to be grateful for your life each and every day.

About the Author

Dr. Alan Wolfelt is an author, educator, and grief counselor. He serves as Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and is on the faculty at the University of Colorado Medical School's Department of Family Medicine. Dr. Wolfelt has written many compassionate books designed to help people mourn well so they can continue to love and live well, including *The Mourner's Book of Hope*. Visit www.centerforloss.com to learn more about the natural and necessary process of grief and mourning and to order Dr. Wolfelt's books.