

Hope As A Light In The Darkness During Transitions

By Chan Hellman, PhD

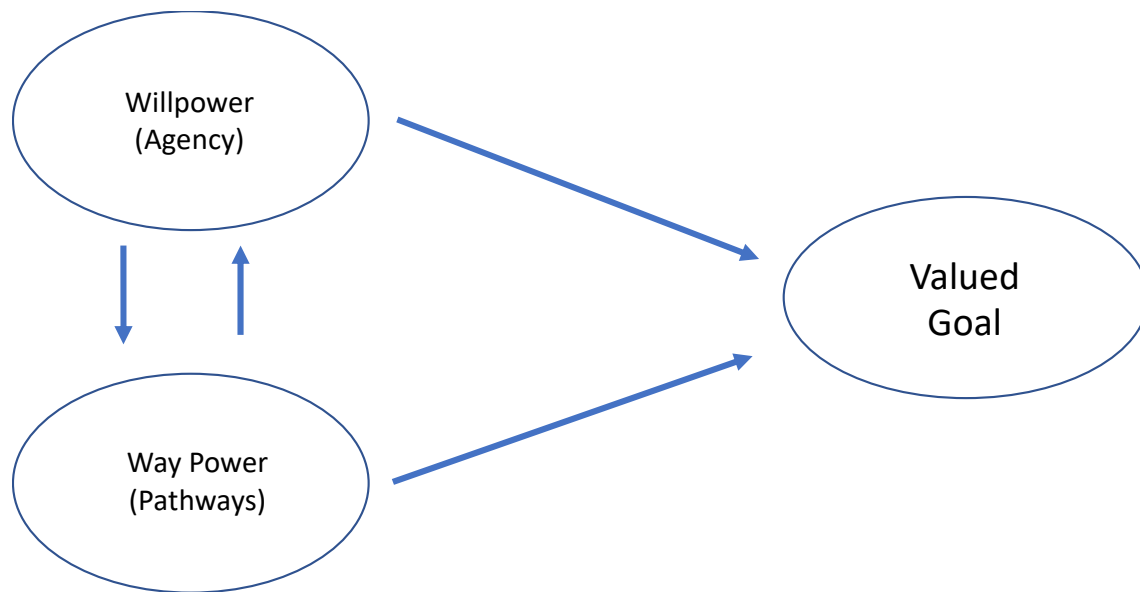
Professor – University of Oklahoma

Director – Hope Research Center

Author – Hope Rising: How The Science of Hope Can Change Your Life

Hope is the belief that our future can be better than our past, and that we have a role to play in making that future a reality. This positive expectation of the future is grounded in three simple elements: Goals, Pathways, and Willpower. *Goals* are the cornerstone of our ability to hope. Goals can be both short-term or long-term. However, goals must be desired enough to motivate action. The nature of the goals we set drive the way we think about both pathways and willpower. *Pathways* thinking refers to the ability to identify strategies or plans on how to achieve our goals. The hopeful child is able to identify multiple pathways to the goal and can effectively identify alternative pathways or solutions to potential barriers. *Willpower (Agency)* thinking refers to the mental energy we deploy toward our goal pursuits. The hopeful child has the agency to self-regulate their thoughts, behaviors, and emotions when selecting and pursuing their desired goals. It is important to recognize that hope is a way of thinking and not an emotion. Because hope is a way of thinking about our future, it can be taught and learned.

Hope is About Action: Think about how often we use the word hope in our everyday use. I **hope** it doesn't rain today. I **hope** you are well. I **hope** you have a great day. In order to be considered hopeful, we must have both willpower and pathways for our goals. Neither willpower nor pathways alone is sufficient. For example, a child may have a strong desire to get good grades but lacks the ability to work math problems. Alternatively, the child may have the understanding of how to work the math problem but find themselves unmotivated to do the work. Both scenarios will result in failure or under achievement. A wish is when we desire an outcome but have no pathways to achieve our goals. Hope is about taking action to pursue your goals. A wish is a passive desire for a goal.



...agency without pathways is a wish!

We believe that you can impact a child's hope! Use the simple strategies of identifying valued goals, developing clear pathways and become part of the child's team and encourage and nurture their willpower. How could you help a child find hope, enhance their hope or model hope in the classroom?

Why Hope Matters:

Hope theory provides the foundation for understanding human behavior in the social environment and offers an evidenced based framework for educators, school leaders, and community stakeholders in an effort to create and sustain a positive learning environment. With over 2,000 published research studies, hope has emerged as one of the best predictors of goal attainment and well-being for both children and adults. This research has established that 1) Hope leads to positive outcomes, 2) Hope is a protective factor buffering against adversity and stress, and 3) Hope can be taught and learned.

In education settings, the science of hope shows that a child's hope scores predict better grades, attendance, and graduation rates. Classrooms with higher hope children perform better in terms of chronic absenteeism, truancy, drop-out rates, academic achievement, and graduation rates even when controlling for social economic status. Children with higher hope are better at self-regulating their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. They are better at setting goals, finding

pathways, problem solving, and sustaining the willpower to pursue their goals even when faced with barriers and adversity. Hopeful children have better academic engagement as well as overall well-being.

In 2018, the Healthy Youth Survey included the children's hope scale. The findings from the survey show that hope has a strong negative association with depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. In some of our analyses we found that hope was a protective factor against bullying especially among youth identifying as LGBTQ+.

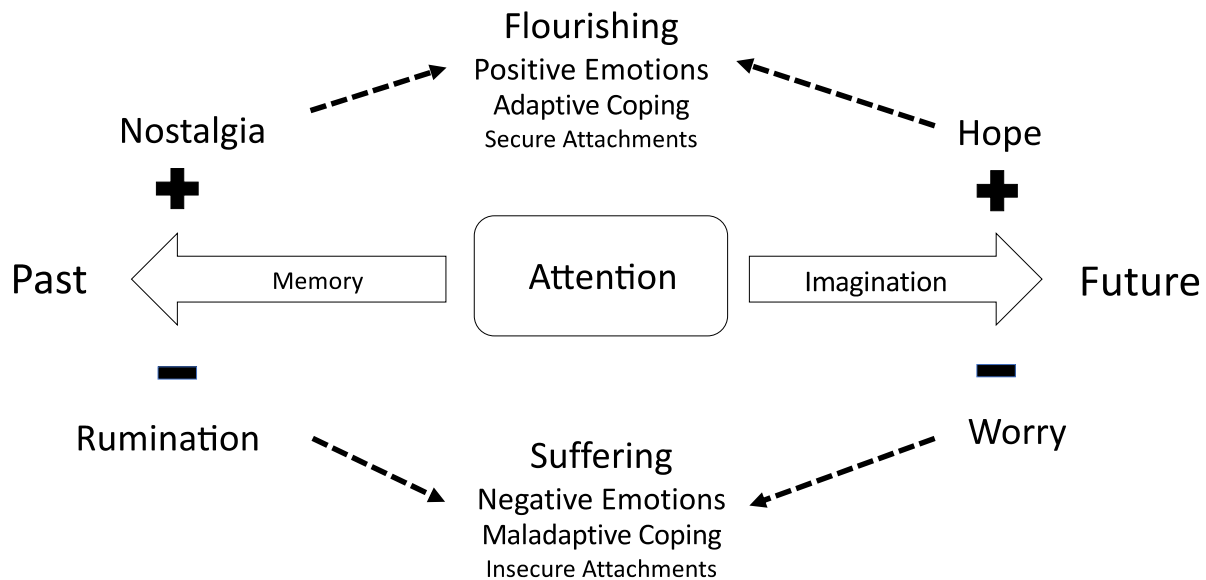
Hope is important for staff as well. At the Hope Research Center, our studies show that school staff with higher hope are better at finding strategies to increase their well-being as well. In the school districts where we are building Hope Centered and Trauma Informed framework, we have found that hope is associated with lower burnout, lower turnover, increased job satisfaction, increased engagement, and higher well-being.

Fear and Uncertainty:

Let's practice a quick hope-based exercise. Get into a relaxed position and take a deep cleansing breath. I want you to close your eyes and let your mind wonder for several seconds or about one minute. Don't read the next sentence until you have done this exercise.

When you open your eyes, I want you to identify where your attention was focused. Were you thinking about the future? Or were you reflecting on the past? Research shows that we are rarely focused on the present moment (mindfulness practice). Most people tend to be focused on the future. However, thinking about the future or past can be either positive (hope, nostalgia) or negative (worry, rumination). Our research shows that times of adversity (like the pandemic) we tend to focus our attention on the negative side of the future resulting in "worry" (by the way, the positive side is hope). In fact, high trauma children and adults are more likely to be ruminating on the past. When we focus much of our attention on the negative experience of worry or rumination, we score much higher on indicators of suffering.

Where Do You Focus Your Attention?



When we are faced with transitions (planned or unplanned) the uncertainty can often result in the emotional experience of fear and/or anger (worried about the future or ruminating on the past). These are natural reactions when our way normal way of doing things (pathways) face barriers or become blocked. When fear and uncertainty persist, they can lead to feelings of despair and acts of desperation. Unfortunately, desperation can become dysfunctional pathways (e.g., hoarding toilet paper or sanitizer, social isolation), and ultimately hopelessness.

The good news is that hope can be taught (and learned)! Our research shows this to be true among high trauma children and adults as well. We have dedicated our research to building research-based strategies that are hope centered and trauma informed. Nurturing hope in times of transition follow a simple process.

Nurturing Hope During Transition:

Step 1: Remembering Hope. Hope is the belief the future will be better than today and that you have a role to make that future possible. Hope is about action and is not a wish. Hope is comprised of our ability establish valued goals, set pathways to achieve those goals, and find the willpower to make those goals happen.

Step 2: Setting Meaningful Goals. Transitions can create uncertainty and fear that can be remedied by what we have learned from the science of hope. Those who have experienced traumatic adversities are often better at short term goal setting and struggle or become

overwhelmed with long-term goals. Goals can be either avoidance or achievement oriented. Hopeful people are more likely to set achievement-oriented goals. Higher trauma individuals are more likely to set avoidant goals. During times of transitions that cause fear and worry, we can begin to nurture hope by starting with short-term goals that may be more avoidant (e.g., avoid getting sick) as opposed to achieving an outcome. What can you accomplish this week, today, this morning?

Step 3: Finding Pathways. Hope begets hope. We have found when you start to take meaningful steps toward your goals, you will build your willpower that reinforces you to keep moving forward. Therefore, once you set your goal, identify the action steps needed. These are actually sub goals or benchmarks that must be met in order to achieve your goal. Each time you achieve a step it demonstrates that you have the power to achieve the future you desire (Hope).

Step 4: Hope is a Social Gift. Hope does not happen in isolation. Hope occurs in relationship with others. Mentors, coaches, teachers, parents are all potential drivers of hope for youth. Our research shows that for both children and adults, having someone you can count on in times of trouble is a significant predictor of hope. Therefore, in this final step, once you have identified your goal and pathways, it will be helpful to connect with those social resources who can nurture and support you along your journey of hope.

Talk of transitions today are filled with uncertainty and fear. What will school look like next year? How do we stay connected with youth who may not have reliable technology during social distancing? What will be the outcome as we argue opening our communities or continue social distancing policies? Remembering hope can provide a light in the darkness during a transition filled fear and uncertainty. Hope leads to positive outcomes, hope can protect us during stress and adversity, and most importantly, hope can be taught.