

Learning to Hope – Brene Brown

From the Behavioral Health Revolution Website: http://www.bhevolution.org/public/cultivating_hope.page

In studying resilience in the face of trauma and pain, researcher Brené Brown found that the capacity to hope-intelligently and actively-is an essential component.

As a researcher, I can't think of two words that are more misunderstood than the words hope and power. As soon as I realized that hope is an important piece of Wholehearted living, I started investigating and found the work of C. R. Snyder, a former researcher at the University of Kansas, Lawrence.¹ Like most people, I always thought of hope as an emotion-like a warm feeling of optimism and possibility. I was wrong.

I was shocked to discover that hope is not an emotion; it's a way of thinking or a cognitive process. Emotions play a supporting role, but hope is really a thought process made up of what Snyder calls a trilogy of goals, pathways, and agency.² In very simple terms, hope happens when

- We have the ability to set realistic goals (I know where I want to go).
- We are able to figure out how to achieve those goals, including the ability to stay flexible and develop alternative routes (I know how to get there, I'm persistent, and I can tolerate disappointment and try again).
- We believe in ourselves (I can do this!).

So, hope is a combination of setting goals, having the tenacity and perseverance to pursue them, and believing in our own abilities.

And, if that's not news enough, here's something else: Hope is learned! Snyder suggests that we learn hopeful, goal-directed thinking in the context of other people. Children most often learn hope from their parents. Snyder says that to learn hopefulness, children need relationships that are characterized by boundaries, consistency, and support. I think it's so empowering to know that I have the ability to teach my children how to hope. It's not a crapshoot. It's a conscious choice.

To add to Snyder's work on hope, I found in my research that men and women who self-report as hopeful put considerable value on persistence and hard work. The new cultural belief that everything should be fun, fast, and easy is inconsistent with hopeful thinking. It also sets us up for hopelessness. When we experience something that is difficult and requires significant time and effort, we are quick to think, This is supposed to be easy; it's not worth the effort, or, This should be easier: it's only hard and slow because I'm not good at it. Hopeful self-talk sounds more like, This is tough, but I can do it.

On the other hand, for those of us who have the tendency to believe that everything worthwhile should involve pain and suffering (like yours truly), I've also learned that never fun, fast, and easy is as detrimental to hope as always fun, fast, and easy. Given my abilities to chase down a goal and bulldog it until it surrenders from pure exhaustion, I resented learning this. Before this research I believed that unless blood, sweat, and tears were involved, it must not be that important. I was wrong. Again.

We develop a hopeful mind-set when we understand that some worthy endeavors will be difficult and time consuming and not enjoyable at all. Hope also requires us to understand that just because the process of reaching a goal happens to be fun, fast, and easy doesn't mean that it has less value than a difficult goal. If we want to cultivate hopefulness, we have to be willing to be flexible and demonstrate perseverance. Not every goal will look and feel the same. Tolerance for disappointment, determination, and a belief in self are the heart of hope.

As a college professor and researcher, I spend a significant amount of time with teachers and school administrators. Over the past two years I've become increasingly concerned that we're raising children who have little tolerance for disappointment and have a strong sense of entitlement, which is very different than agency. Entitlement is "I deserve this just because I want it" and agency is "I know I can do this." The combination of fear of disappointment, entitlement, and performance pressure is a recipe for hopelessness and self-doubt.

Hopelessness is dangerous because it leads to feelings of powerlessness. Like the word hope, we often think of power as negative. It's not. The best definition of power comes from Martin Luther King Jr. He described power as the ability to effect change. If we question our need for power, think about this: How do you feel when you believe that you are powerless to change something in your life?

Powerlessness is dangerous. For most of us, the inability to effect change is a desperate feeling. We need resilience and hope and a spirit that can carry us through the doubt and fear. We need to believe that we can effect change if we want to live and love with our whole hearts.

Sources cited:

1. C. R. Snyder. Psychology of Hope: You Can Get There from Here. New York: Free Press, 2003.
2. C.R. Snyder, K. A. Lehman, B. Kluck, and Y. Monsson, "Hope for Rehabilitation and Vice Versa," Rehabilitation Psychology. 51:2 (2006): 89-112; C. R. Snyder, "Hope Theory: Rainbows in the Mind," Psychological Inquiry. 13:4 (2002): 249-275.

Excerpted from The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are by Brené Brown (Hazelden 2010).

SIDEBAR:

Brene Brown's lecture has been identified as one of the best of the TED talks of 2011 by the Huffington Post. See her talk here. [link to <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/news/tedtalks2011>]