

The Healing Power of Hope and Optimism

What are hope and optimism?

Hope is about leaving room for something good to happen. Optimism is about having hope, trusting that things will work out. Hope and optimism are linked to your belief that things will turn out okay when change happens in your life. We know that people can learn to be more optimistic and hopeful, and that engaging in these positive behaviors can improve one's health.

How do aspirations fit in?

One way to think about hope and optimism is to look at the Aspiration Model from the Institute for Alternative Futures, shown below. Aspirations are what you want from your life, the beliefs and goals that are most important to you and guide what you do. The model shows different ways we can handle change when working towards our aspirations. The left half of the model shows a path to hope and optimism, and the right half shows a path away from them, to being burnt-out and hopeless.

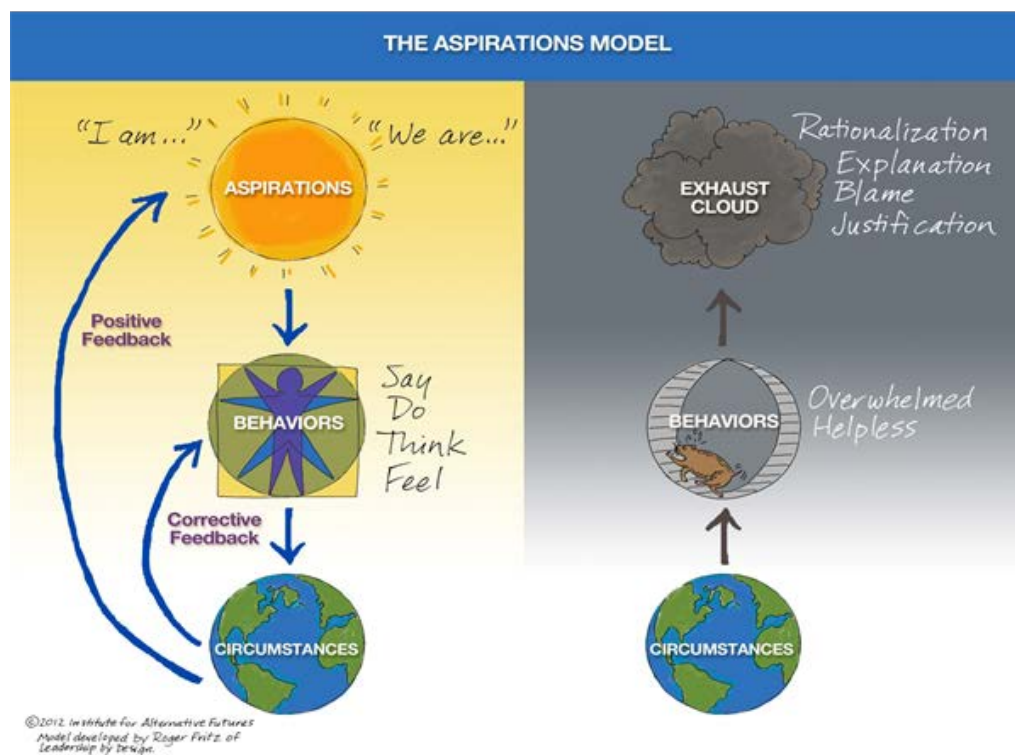


Figure 1. The Aspirations Model.

At the bottom of the picture are two globes with the word “Circumstances.” You deal with circumstances all the time. These include things that happen to you in the different areas of your life, such as your health, relationships, money, and work. When circumstances happen, you have a choice about how to deal with them. These are the “Behaviors” shown in the middle row of the picture.

The right side shows how circumstances are dealt with in an unhealthy way, where things become negative, sad, and difficult. This is what it can look like when you do not feel hope or optimism. When a circumstance happens, you may feel scared, angry, or helpless. It can become a pattern to feel this way, to the point where you might start to feel like a hamster on a wheel. With each bad thing that happens, the negative emotions build up. You may feel sad, overwhelmed, and/or blame yourself. Eventually, you could become exhausted, as shown with the “Exhaust Cloud.”

The left side shows how something that happens can be interpreted in a more positive, hopeful, and optimistic manner. When a circumstance happens, you can pay attention to your thoughts and feelings. If you notice patterns, you can decide if you want them to continue, or if you want to change them. This is mindful awareness. It can give you more power to choose how you react to your circumstances. By being mindfully aware, you can go back to thinking about what matters most to you when circumstances are hard. That can guide what you say, do, think, and feel under those circumstances. This is shown as “Corrective Feedback” in the Aspirations Model.

Most people find that focusing on things that really matter helps them avoid the “Exhaust Cloud.” Having a goal that guides you can give you more power to deal with problems with positive emotions and an optimistic state of mind. Such “Positive Feedback,” shown in the model, will help you meet your aspirations.

How can hope and optimism be healing?

In research studies, optimism and hope have been linked to better physical and mental health outcomes.¹ Optimism can help people to have more successful relationships and to be more involved in their community. It can also promote a sense of well-being during difficult times.

One study looked at the relationship between anxiety, the brain, and optimism. The study found that being optimistic might affect a part of the brain that helps to control anxiety.² Another study of optimism in patients with type 2 diabetes showed that being optimistic may help you handle stress better, which can help reduce the risk of chronic health problems.³

The field of Positive Psychology makes use of hope and optimism. It is about helping people focus on what they do well and on what is good about their lives. A study found that people using Positive Psychology had better physical and mental health, including decreasing feelings of depression. The longer people worked with Positive Psychology, the better they did with depression.⁴

How can I practice hope and optimism?

There are many ways to practice hope and optimism. Below are some options you may wish to try to help you get started.

- Create a mission statement. What gives you meaning and hope in your life? You might want to write it down or put it somewhere where you can look at it all the time. Use this to drive your actions and choices in life.
- Set goals. This works best if you can be very clear about what your goals are and if you can go into a lot of details about how to reach them. Goals should be realistic (things you can really do), and you should share them with someone else so they can help you stay on track.
- Focus on what is good in your life. What is going well? What are you good at? Who is there for you in your life? Some people find it helps to think about 3 good things that happened to you at the end of each day. If you can, tell someone else those 3 things.
- Avoid complaining. One way to help you notice when you complain is to wear a bracelet or a ring. Any time you complain, change it to the other hand. This helps with mindful awareness. You give more power to whatever you focus on, and this can remind you to focus on what is good.
- Practice mindful awareness on a regular basis. See how you can make your present situation more optimistic and hopeful. Get more information about mindful awareness on the University of Wisconsin Integrative Health [Clinician and Patient Education](#) web page.
- Do things that make you feel positive. Examples might include music, dancing, writing, painting, or building something. Volunteering can be an option too.
- Be part of a positive group. Find other people who have the same goals. You can give support to them, and also get support from them.

Who shouldn't practice the healing power of hope and optimism?

Practicing hope and optimism is overall very safe. If you have any questions or concerns, please speak with your health care provider. Mental health providers can be helpful.

For you to consider:

- When you look at the Aspirations Model, what comes up for you about how you live your life?
- How do you think your health would change if you had even more hope and optimism?
- Do you think practicing hope and optimism is an option for you?
- How will you practice? When? What do you think would work best for you?

The information in this handout is general. **Please work with your health care team to use the information in the best way possible to promote your health and happiness.**



For more information:

ORGANIZATION	RESOURCES	WEBSITE
University of Wisconsin Integrative Health Program	A variety of handouts on Personal Development and Mindful Awareness	https://www.fammed.wisc.edu/integrative/resources/modules/

This handout was adapted for the University of Wisconsin Integrative Health Program from the original written for the Veteran's Health Administration (VHA) Office of Patient Centered Care and Cultural Transformation (OPCC&CT) by Mara Motley, MD, Academic Integrative Health Fellow, Integrative Health Program, University of Wisconsin Department of Family Medicine and Community Health. It is based in part on a tool for clinicians, "Aspiration, Appreciation, Gratitude and Optimism," written by Adam Rindfleisch, MPhil, MD.

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References

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