

TO YOUR HEALTH

Carleton-Willard Village Out-Patient Clinic

100 Old Billerica Road, Bedford MA

Volume 23, Number 1



January 2018

Keeping Hope Alive

by Susan Cusson, NP

It's that time of year when we wish "Happy New Year" to family, friends and even strangers. While the wish for happiness is universal, some people also make resolutions for specific improvements in their own lives. Ambitions for a career, new house and family are some of the goals that keep the younger generations motivated. As you age that focus tends to decrease. You might be asking yourself what's left to achieve? Is it even worth striving for goals anymore? The answer is yes, it's probably more important than ever. Goals change as you age but they remain important to your health and happiness. Making a new year's resolution is a traditional time to set a goal for yourself. It can also be a concrete expression of hope.

Author and activist Rebecca Solnit describes hope as a place of uncertainty, where we have the space to act and to try to influence the outcome. She writes "the belief that what we do matters, even though how and when it may matter, who and what it may impact, are not things that we can know beforehand. We may not, in fact, know them afterwards either, but they matter just the same..."

Studies show hope can help us survive and adapt to difficult circumstances as well as help us develop and maintain healthy daily behaviors. Research consistently demonstrates better health outcomes in people who maintain a hopeful outlook. What you hope for is less important than what hope does for your overall well being.

Imagine being diagnosed with a cancer that only had a 5% chance of survival. Embracing the possibility that you just might be in that 5% can actually help you generate positive biological changes in your nervous system. Belief and expectation can also decrease pain by releasing the brain's endorphins, mimicking the effects of morphine, thereby reducing the need for pain medication. Feeling hopeless about a situation can result in resignation and a negative cascade leading to increased pain and worse health outcomes. Blindly believing that everything will work out just fine can also produce resignation. We need to have a motive to apply ourselves toward making things better. In order to thrive we need to find the right balance of critical thinking and hope.

In his book, "The Anatomy of Hope", oncologist Jerome Groopman talks about his personal experience with severe low back pain from a ruptured disc. When his surgeon told him there was no hope, he lived in what he described as a "labyrinth of relapsing pain and debility" for nineteen years. After all those years he saw another surgeon who offered him hope and a plan that worked. Hope is like a key that opens the door to the possibility of change and allows new neurological patterns to develop.

Groopman's research shows that belief and expectation, two mindsets associated with hope, have an impact on the nervous system which in turn sets off a chain reaction that makes improvement and recovery more likely.



This idea that what's in your head can influence your health is a powerful tool. When it comes to managing pain no one wants to hear "it's all in your head", that would invalidate the reality of what you're feeling. By accepting the idea that "it is *also* in your head", you gain the power to know you *can* have some control over your well being. The chemicals dopamine, serotonin and oxytocin are all right there inside your brain, the key is learning how to activate them. Even something as simple as a hug can trigger release of oxytocin which in turn can lead to a decrease in heart rate and a drop in the stress hormones cortisol and norepinephrine. This trickle-down effect throughout the body has a calming effect on the nervous system and very real physical and psychological benefits.

To effect positive change, hope must be accompanied by action. If we think of hope as a place of uncertainty, where we have the space to act and to try to influence the outcome, what actions can we take to effect change? Pain, for example, can become chronic when central neural pathways become established. It is possible to reprogram those neural pathways and reset the autonomic nervous system. Eastern disciplines like yoga, mindfulness, meditation on focused breathing and neurofeedback have been used in a variety of settings with positive outcomes. Training of this type has been used to teach professional athletes how to respond to a stressor, stay focused, quickly recover from errors and then still their minds when it's all over. These practices also benefit people with cancer by helping to relieve symptoms of nerve damage related to chemotherapy. By choosing the mindset of hope, anything is possible. Believe that it is worth your time and energy to take care of your body. Be compassionate to yourself. Train your brain to stress less.

What about false hope? Gropman writes: "False hope does not recognize the risks and dangers that true hope does. False hope can lead to intemperate choices and flawed decision making. True hope takes into account the real threats that exist and seeks to navigate the best path around them. Hope is not just about positive thinking, that's just half of the equation. The other half is the belief in the power that you can make it so. Wishing encourages passivity, hope represents an active stance". In his book, "Making Hope Happen", author Shane Lopez sums it up well: "wishing is the fantasy that everything is going to turn out ok, hoping is actually showing up for the hard work".

Here's to making New Year's resolutions and keeping hope alive.

Health Education Lecture

Dr. Maureen O'Connor will give a talk about memory loss, how much is to be expected as one gets older and what should trigger a visit to the doctor. As you age, you may find yourself worrying about your memory. Where did I put those car keys? What time was my appointment? What was her name again? Dr. O'Connor is Assistant Professor of Neurology at Boston University, Director of Neuropsychology at the Bedford Veterans Affairs Hospital and the author of a recent book *Seven Steps to Managing Your Memory*. Please join us for some real life examples on how to successfully manage age-related memory loss.

Wednesday, January 10, 2018
10:30 am —11:30 am
Auditorium Center

2018
Happy New Year!