

Rebuilding Lost Hope

By Leslie Becker-Phelps, PhD

It has become a common feeling, I believe, as we have watched our heroes falling over the years, that our own small stone of activism, which might not seem to measure up to the rugged boulders of heroism we have so admired, is a paltry offering toward the building of an edifice of hope. Many who believe this choose to withhold their offerings out of shame. This is the tragedy of the world. For we can do nothing substantial toward changing our course on the planet, a destructive one, without rousing ourselves, individual by individual, and bringing our small, imperfect stones to the pile.

– Alice Walker

Alice Walker's observation about building a better world one imperfect stone at a time applies equally well to "building" a better self. We are all – each one of us – imperfect. That's the nature of being human. But too often, people feel pinned down by the weight of their personal flaws or mistakes, feeling too ashamed, demoralized, or dejected to carry on. Or, they simply feel not up to the task at hand. So, they stop trying to bring their best or true selves to each day, which is a tragic loss for them and the world. If you struggle with losing hope, re-infusing yourself with self-compassion, greater inner peace, and even happiness can help you to let yourself hope again.

Many people try to rally hope by pretending that things aren't so bad. But they don't really believe it because they "know" that they are lying to themselves. Instead, you can find hope in learning to accept what is – your outward struggles and your inner flaws. Accepting your limitations and imperfections, which are part of being human, might seem, at first, self-defeating. But it can offer just the opposite... a route out of hopelessness and into a more positive, compassionate, and hopeful perspective.

By stopping the laser-focused (and failing) attack on your current problem, you can begin attending to the full scope of your circumstance and what you are feeling. The solution might include finding a way to continue forward toward your goal, or it might be in changing your focus. For instance, when "Jessica" felt hopeless about finding a romantic partner because she had herpes, she was also consumed with anger toward herself for having contracted it. However, in learning to accept her situation (not be happy about it, but stop fighting the acceptance of it), she freed up her mind to take a different perspective. She calmed some of her concerns by recognizing that ninety percent of adults have been exposed to it by age 50 and that many of these people have fulfilling romantic relationships. This realization opened her up to having self-compassion, letting go of her hopelessness, and moving forward in looking for a partner.

To increase your hope, start by acknowledging that everyone has struggles, limitations, and imperfections. As you come to accept your flawed humanity, you will be less compelled to

rail against it, and will no longer feel ashamed of it. With the blanket of inadequacy or shame pulled away (or at least partly off), you can look more closely and compassionately at yourself.

Choose to nurture greater self-awareness. As you do, you will develop an ability to step outside your experiences and observe them. With this perspective, you can transform your automatic reactions into considered responses. So, for “Jessica,” rather than getting consumed by reactive anger toward herself for having herpes, she realized she felt afraid. Instead of cursing herself out, she accepted the reality, found ways to comfort herself, and learned more about how others who have herpes manage relationships. Even if you don’t have the energy or sufficient desire to take constructive actions in a given moment, understanding yourself better will help with feeling more kindly toward yourself. You will wish for your struggles and pain to lessen. In other words, you will feel self-compassion.

Such compassionate self-awareness can offer insight into what you need in order to go forward. It can offer you a more positive sense of yourself, and the desire and wherewithal to nurture inner healing while also prompting you to respond to others with compassion and support. As a result, self-compassion can help build hope for – and ultimately the reality of – a better tomorrow for you and those whose lives you touch.

To learn more about how to build hope, check out this 4-minute video.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4QnHTXbPoqQ>