Learned Hopefulness

The Power of Positivity to Overcome Depression

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Foreword by Scott Barry Kaufman, PhD
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“Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul and sings the tune without the words and never stops at all.”

—Emily Dickinson

“A new baby is like the beginning of all things—wonder, hope, a dream of possibilities.”

—Eda LeShan
This book is dedicated to my grandson,
Callahan Thomas Fetrow.
Introduction

“Hope is not a form of guarantee; it’s a form of energy, and very frequently that energy is strongest in circumstances that are very dark.”

—John Berger

When my marriage capsized after thirty years of being together, I had to learn to be hopeful. Since you’ve picked up this book, perhaps something has arrived in your life without warning. Like a boat hitting an unseen iceberg, your ship sank, and you’re fighting for your life. When these things happen, we may feel uncertain about how to move forward in our lives. I am not typically a depressed person. I am usually upbeat, have good energy, and take setbacks in stride. So as my wife and I separated and divorced, I was thrown for a loop by my somber mood, low energy, and the loss of my enthusiasm. Work was the hardest part. There’s nothing worse than a depressed psychologist. I continued my clinical work, but it was difficult to listen to people talking about their depression when I could barely manage my own. You think that’s bad? Let me tell you what happened to me…

Then I was introduced to positive psychology. My best friend was becoming a positive psychologist, and he encouraged me to try the techniques—for example, reviewing the previous day each morning through the lens of gratitude, or doing something kind for someone else. At first, this seemed like using a pea shooter to bring down a battleship. How could these small shifts manage the immense pain inside of me? But nothing else was helping. I needed help
developing an appreciation for my life and my future again. Although it had never been a problem before, it now seemed impossible.

Everything I’d worked for, hoped for, and believed in seemed ruined. My vision of the future had become to simply survive it. Having gratitude and being kind to others was not my idea of getting better. It seemed too simple, too easy, not powerful enough to lift my low mood. I was dealing with financial, social, and emotional whip-lash. How could reviewing my miserable day through the lens of gratitude change that?

My friend was persistent, though, and dragged me to the first international positive psychology association conference, where I first learned of the profound and powerful research being done. If what they were proposing were even marginally true, psychology was on the brink of a new dawn. I learned that positive psychology is the study of strengths that empower people and communities to thrive, based on the belief that people want to live fulfilling and meaningful lives, and focused on how we can cultivate what is best within ourselves. The research is aimed at ways to feel more happy more often, by improving our experiences of love, work, and play. This mindset offered my first taste of genuine hope.

In its simplest form, the research awakened me to the possibility that it was feasible to change how I felt—to actually transform my feelings. Even with all my training, clinical work, and supervision, this was the first time I believed that dreary feelings could actually be altered, not just tolerated. This led me to embrace the findings of positive psychology, and the practices that taught me to hope again.

**From Surviving to Thriving**

The field of clinical psychology has traditionally focused on identifying the problems causing emotional pain and mental illness, and then working to alleviate symptoms. Do our methods—talk therapy
of various kinds, sometimes medication—work? Yes. Do they work well, or in a way that lasts? In too many cases, no.1 The fact is, 80 percent of people who recover from depression relapse.2 If you are reading this book, you may be one of them.

You may have found something that helped—therapy, medicine, diet changes, exercise, better sleep, more sunlight—but it may have only worked somewhat, or for some time. The effort succeeded, but it wasn’t sustained. Why? Because traditional psychology and medicine were designed to do only half the job: they get us out of the hole, but they don’t really keep us out. The cycle continues.

What about the 20 percent who recover and don’t relapse? In a series of studies aimed at improving symptoms of depression, researchers found that simple methods focused on cultivating the best in themselves not only prevented participants from relapsing—they maintained sustainable levels of well-being for more than a year.3 Not only did they learn how to steer clear of depression, but they also often learned to thrive.4

They learned hopefulness. As we’ll see in these pages, hopefulness—or hope, as I’ll also call it—is not so much a state of mind as it is a habit of mind, of heart. And habits can be changed. Hopefulness skills won’t replace whatever treatments you’ve been using to control your depression. If you are taking medication, continue. If you have a physical routine that has been helpful, keep doing it. If you’ve developed healthy habits like exercise, good sleep, nutritious diet—keep those up! They support your mental health as much as your physical health. If there are still changes you could make in these areas, what you learn in this book will help you lean into those changes.

Habits of heart, mind, and body affect our mood either positively or negatively. In this book, I will be emphasizing learned hopefulness as a collection of heart and mind habits designed to improve well-being. By focusing on the science of positive psychology, which
highlights emotional well-being, we can maximize the impact that healthy strategies have on our lives. And you'll receive new tools to add to what you are already doing in your life.

Positive psychology practices will not only add to your toolbox, to help you combat low moods, negative thoughts, and grief—but also to shape and influence your positive attributes. Savoring, mindfulness, faith, hope, well-being, and optimism are just some of what you'll learn to cultivate. When you learn tools that both alleviate suffering and allow you to thrive, you learn how to get out of a bad place, stay out, and live a happier life.

The simple truth is this: not being depressed isn't the same as being happy. Whether you've struggled with milder or more severe forms of depression, you will learn ways to be increase hope and be happier. The tools of traditional psychology focus on relieving distress. The tools of positive psychology promote well-being. The combination of the two leads to real and sustained change. These skills have the power to change how you experience the world.

Your Journey Through This Book

Not seeing the obstacles we put in our way, including our own decisions and thought cycles, is what keeps us stuck. Ruminating thoughts siphon our energy and block our positivity. The downward spiral of negative thinking is like a runaway train—leading us to perceive our situation as fixed and unchangeable. If you've ever felt too depleted to even try to get out of your depression—you are not alone.

We are drawn to the familiar, and if what's familiar is negative thinking, we'll have difficulty taking in the positive. It's a cycle, and this book will teach you how to break the cycle and get it spinning in the opposite direction—starting today. Some of the tools you'll learn in this book will help you untangle from the past, others will
help you engage in the present, and more than a few will help you create your future. Some of the best practices can do all of this at once.

The book is organized the way I’ve learned to teach these principles. The first chapter will give you a working knowledge of positive psychology principles and the research behind their effectiveness in short-circuiting depressive spirals. It will also introduce you to some exercises, so you can begin to experience how effective these tools can be. Each of the next seven chapters teaches a choice you can make to learn hopefulness, and the tools to help develop these new habits. As they become habits, the tools get easier to access and use.

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Each of the seven chapters will introduce the main ideas we’ll be working through, talk about the research, and teach you skills, tools, and practices through exploration exercises. All of this will build
your hopefulness, resilience, and well-being. I will also use case studies as examples. All use of names and details have been masked, according to the American Psychological Association’s guide for using case studies.

To keep track of your progress, I encourage you to keep a notebook—a journal that is either handwritten or digital. I’d like you to feel what happens when we do these explorations, so you can assess their effects. It will be most effective if you can do the exercises when you are prompted to. I know it’s tempting to keep reading and do these tasks later, but doing them as we go will give you a real sense of what it’s like to shift your perspective and alter the way your brain processes information. This will support the journey mapped out in this book and remind you of what has worked and how. Let’s begin—hope is waiting.
CHAPTER 1

Positive Psychology as a Science of Hopefulness

“Life isn’t about finding yourself. Life is about creating yourself.”
—George Bernard Shaw

I often travel through Penn Station in New York City and over the years I’ve seen many homeless people begging and talented musicians playing for spare change from commuters. On a particular afternoon, an exceptional violinist was playing an unfamiliar concerto that drew a significant crowd. As it did, one homeless man seized the opportunity and began begging the group for change. He would thrust his change-filled coffee cup in front of each person, shake it, and utter how he needed “just a quarter.” Most of us were annoyed by his intrusive behavior—myself included.

Finally, someone simply shook his head no and pointed in the direction of the violinist. As if woken from a trance, the homeless man began to listen, swaying ever so slightly. He seemed magnetically drawn to the music, and his halting footsteps eventually brought him directly in front of the violinist. The homeless man bent over and poured the contents of his change-filled coffee cup into the open violin case. He then flashed a thumbs-up to the violinist, who responded with a deep nod of appreciation. Nearly every person who witnessed the event—myself included—reached into their wallet to take out money for both men.
To me, this transformational scene in Penn Station seemed to be an allegory. You can think of the homeless man as our negative and annoying thoughts, distracting us from appreciating something good. But when invited to notice the beauty, benefit, and blessing of the beautiful music, by giving everything he had to the musician, the homeless man received way more. His needs were unexpectedly met with abundance.

This is exactly the process with our own perception. When we shift away from distracting negative thoughts toward something positive, we get everything we need—and then some. In my own depression, when I began using positive psychology tools, for the first time the sadness lifted and I felt hope. I felt more energized and positive, which gave me more motivation for change. Since I immersed myself in understanding how hope works, my life has flourished tremendously, in ways I could not have fathomed. As you apply these principles, the same will happen for you. You are meant to do more than just survive—you are meant to thrive.

My ultimate aim is to give you tools to use when times are tough, tools that will rekindle, magnify, and engage you in life again. There is tremendous value in learning how to work with the more bitter and difficult aspects of our life, as therein lies our potential for growth. For us to feel and function better, we need to perceive and experience our struggles differently—through the lens of hope. That we can learn to do this is the promise of positive psychology. Hope is the result of believing that change is possible, and having the tools to make it happen.

Just as when building a home, shovels are used first, to dig a foundation, then a hammer and nails to build the walls, different tools are needed during the process of building hope. Homebuilders and hope-builders alike need a plan, a design to guide them. The blueprint for hope is inspired by the simple fact that we can influence our future.
Psychology’s Shift from Focusing on the Past to Creating the Future

In the 1960s, Martin Seligman theorized that feeling helpless and giving up in one situation creates feelings of helplessness in other situations, causing symptoms of depression. Initially, he and Steve Maier researched how animals failed to escape shock after it was induced by uncontrollable aversive events. The term “learned helplessness” came from these studies and was eventually extended to how the real or perceived inability to control the outcome of a circumstance based on past “learning” was the cause of passivity. In the ’60s, the understanding and technology didn’t allow for investigating the nuanced elements of how the brain functioned, so it was thought that depression was the result of learned helplessness. Seligman’s research and theory have been the dominant view of depression in psychology—until now.

In their fifty-year follow-up, the same researchers proved their initial theory wrong. Once they were able to use all the developments in brain science and biochemistry, they discovered that “Passivity in response to shock is not learned. It is the default, unlearned

response to prolonged aversive events…which in turn inhibits escape.” This deeper understanding has us looking forward to gain control—not backward to unlearn what has happened.

These new discoveries explain how bad events cause us to be anxious and passive—by default. When something bad and prolonged happens, we are evolutionarily programmed to shut down. We become passive because evolution has provided us with a switch that shuts us down, to save our energy when the situation seems bad.

What this means for hope is that our very ability to detect and expect control in the future will pull us out of a slump. Focusing on what can be done in the future rather than on what happened in the
past creates hope. In the researchers’ own words: “We speculate that it is expectations of a better future that most matter in treatment.”

This has direct implications for where hope comes from. How well we envision what is yet to come will determine our motivation. Focusing on what’s happened in the past keeps us sitting in the dark. When we concentrate on future possibilities, we can stand in the light. The pathway in the brain discovered by Maier and Seligman that regulates this future forecasting is called, appropriately enough, the hope circuit.

The Role of Hope in Our Lives

According to Martin Seligman, the “father of positive psychology,” hope is expecting that future bad events will be temporary, specific, and manageable. Other researchers, like Charles (Rick) Snyder and Jennifer Cheavens, have suggested that hope involves having a pathway to achieve goals and the agency, or motivation, to reach these goals. Still other researchers, like Barbara Fredrickson, understand hope as an exception, because unlike other positive emotions, it comes into play only when our circumstances are difficult or at least uncertain. And medical researchers such as Kaye Herth have found that hope happens when there is sufficient support.

No unifying theory on hope has emerged. The research findings are like the parable of the three blind men holding a different part of an elephant, and then describing what the elephant looks like: each description is accurate, yet not complete. So I decided to put together the puzzle pieces from different theories and findings concerning hope. The result is a set of tools that can make hope happen.

High-hope people have a high degree of agency, the energy and motivation to bring about a change. They also have a pathway, a way to get there, and are particularly good at generating new pathways
when they are met with obstacles. They are both resilient and resourceful. This is what we will be working toward in this book.

**Hopefulness Does Not Discount the Negative**

There are common misconceptions about hope that I want to address in this chapter. Here is the first.

**Myth #1:** Hope is purely positive.

**Fact:** Hope is the only positive emotion that needs negativity or uncertainty.

Hope requires negativity or uncertainty to flourish. It is the obstacles, the setbacks, the disappointments that hold the emotional nutrients for growth. The history of psychology has taught us much about discouraging emotions. What makes positive psychology the most rapidly developing specialty in the field is the effect positive emotions can have on the negative. By applying specific tools to activate and enhance our positive emotions, we can shake loose the grip that negative emotions can have in our lives.

Hopefulness is unique because it lives in the balance between positive and negative. As you will learn, it results from a series of decisions about how we interpret setbacks and act upon the world. Hope is a seed planted in the muck of our life that will do everything it can to find the light.

**Exploration: The Thoughts That Hold You Back**

One of the main features of depressed thinking is rumination. These familiar repetitive thoughts pull us into a downward spiral, robbing us of the energy to change. As we move toward the perspective shifts that lead to hope, I invite you to write down these repetitive thoughts. They hold you back, and identifying them is the first step.
in challenging them. You’re not going to confront these thoughts just yet, but you’ll want to get a sense of what you are up against.

Think about the things you want or have wanted and what is preventing you from these goals. Where are you stuck? Please turn to your journal and take time to write about this now. Believe it or not, just writing down what is bothering you has been shown to have a therapeutic effect. As you develop the tools for turning these thoughts around, we’ll circle back to this in Chapter 6.

**Small Efforts Can Activate Hope**

Hope is not a feeling of longing for something yet being unable to make it happen. It involves the agency to change things.

**Myth # 2:** You either have hope or you don’t.

**Fact:** Hope can be activated and cultivated.

Evidence shows that finding small ways to feel better activates hopeful feelings—which means that hope can be regulated, improved, and cultivated.\(^\text{12}\) It also seems that having fewer negative feelings leads to higher levels of hope.\(^\text{13}\)

This is a game-changer—a radically different understanding of how to introduce hope in our lives. Instead of waiting for hope to arrive and motivate us, we can do something immediately to activate it and bring it closer to our awareness. We have the power to activate hope, by using specific approaches to help us make better choices.

Your depression isn’t random. There are specific reasons it exists. Depression typically grows out of worrying, and as humans we were born to worry. But about what, how often, and when we worry is unique to you, and learning to change these patterns will help release you from the grip of negativity and improve your mood. It all
begins by noticing that we feel more drawn to paying attention to the negative than to the positive.

**Become Aware of Seeking the Negative**

In many ways, the condition of being human sets us up for negative thinking. Think about when you have something stuck in your teeth. A piece of kale, perhaps. Where does your tongue go? It goes directly to the problem and works to solve it. If you have bitten your lip, your tongue does the same thing—it is immediately dispatched to soothe the wounded area. What your tongue never does is hang out by your back molars, feeling how nice they are. The tongue's default mechanism is to sweep the mouth, constantly looking for problems. If something doesn't taste good, feel right, or is injured—the tongue goes on full alert, and works to resolve it. But when your tongue detects everything is okay, it doesn't do a damn thing.

Our brains work the same way. A brain is, first and foremost, a tool for survival. Its first job—like the tongue's—is to protect us from what’s wrong, bad, or dangerous. The brain has evolved over centuries, developing what evolutionary scientists call a “negativity bias”: we are hardwired to move away from what can hurt us.

The brain is constantly assessing what is and isn't a threat. If something is a danger, the brain figures out what needs to be done. If you’ve ever walked down a city street with hundreds of people around, you know what happens when one person starts yelling too loud or starts a fight with someone. You go on high alert and begin assessing the situation. *Should I run away? Run toward? Stand still?* Danger dominates our concentration and concern. Our brain is in search of what’s wrong, making these assessments between twenty and fifty thousand times a day.

Negative thoughts are often the essential ingredients for our success as they can motivate us to change. Isn't that the reason you
got this book? Your negative thoughts, feelings, and experiences allowed you to believe that something might help. Your pain motivated the need for change and generated hope—instead of reminding you of your weakness, it summoned your strength. You can learn to summon this strength anytime you need it.

**The Balancing Force of Positivity**

Just like the tongue does more than protect us, the brain is designed to do more than worry. Survival and enjoyment both strive to keep us safe and happy. We need both: to push away from what can hurt us and be pulled toward what will help us grow. Only worry tips the scale too far in the direction of anxiety and depression. Only focusing on the pleasures of life makes us too vulnerable. We need an equalizing of our abilities and motives—emotional balance, like the ancient philosophies have told us all along.

What happens when you see something good? If you’re like me you’ll probably notice it, but you won’t pay nearly as much attention as you would if you felt threatened. Someone helping a woman carry her bags will be noticed, but the screaming man yelling at a passing bicyclist will hijack our attention.

We are programmed to notice negativity, but when we continue to focus on it, a decision is being made. What causes depression is repeatedly focusing on the negative—and then getting stuck there. It emphasizes our weaknesses and erases possibility from our future.

When you are blocked from your goal and can’t find a pathway to it, the disappointment causes your body and brain to react. More often than not, our first reaction is anger—blaming others for what’s happened. Then we often blame ourselves. After this, we usually give up. Why bother?

These initial responses have very deep ties to our evolution. Like the tongue or brain, we are assessing a potential threat. Can
this hurt us? Do we run away from the conflict? Attack it? Or will we assess the situation to come up with an idea about what to do? Although these moments may seem like a reflex, you are making an assessment, *a decision* about their potential to harm. You are making a choice about how to take action.

New research shows that symptoms of depression appear to be default human reactions to bad events. This places depression in the same category as other (situational) threats where we are forced to appraise and choose a response. Just like negative events hijack our attention, causing us to appraise the threat in a situation, feeling angry, anxious, or stuck when expectations haven’t been met does the same thing. Ruminating on the negativity puts our brain in a threatening situation. The result? We give up. Why waste valuable energy on a threat we are convincing ourselves can’t be changed? If we persuade ourselves that the future can’t be influenced by our actions, the default response is depression.

Adding Hope to Evolutionary Reactions

Where is hope in this response? Hope is another resource that is present, and it can be cultivated as a strong alternative to the other three. Fight, flight, or freeze aren’t the only options. Finding hope is a fourth. Adding hope to the list offers a more accurate and complete understanding of what is possible when we are confronted with negativity or uncertainty.

Hope is what happens when another thought comes in and assesses what we can do with the situation. *Is there something I can do to make a change?* Hope doesn’t deny the situation—it just defines it differently. Like when you picked up this book. You didn’t deny your situation, you were simply searching for another way to look at it.

Getting angry, giving up, and feeling stuck might have more to do with reflexes than a thoughtful reaction, *but they are still the result*
of an appraisal. Because of the negativity bias, when bad things happen they get higher priority. But that doesn’t mean they have to dominate. If you don’t challenge your thinking about something, the negativity bias is sure to keep interpreting what happened as a threat. This is what gets us stuck. We keep appraising the situation as a menace and continue to protect ourselves from it, focused on survival.

When we experience loss, have a goal thwarted, or are frightened, we assess the situation and study our pain. When this happens, one or both of the necessary ingredients for hope is activated: we feel negative and/or uncertain. While these are exactly the same triggers for fight, flight, or freeze, they also spark what is necessary for hope. When we ask ourselves, What can I do now?—we have an opportunity. Instead of “fight,” “flight,” or “freeze”—we can focus on “future.” Hope is also an assessment—one of future possibilities. But we may need tools to help us make this shift in perception.

**Exploration: Experiment with Shifting Your Attention**

To illustrate how a shift in perception takes place, examine this image of a duck facing the left side of this page. Notice the duck’s bill and eye.
Now slowly look over to the right of this figure. As you do, the eye of the duck becomes the eye of a rabbit facing the right side of this page. The two protruding shapes take on the appearance of the rabbit’s ears. Glancing back to the left you’ll perceive the duck again. Shifting to the right, you’ll see the rabbit. You should be able to go back and forth between the two animals, shifting impressions according to what you focus on.

I invited you to look at this picture of a duck and you easily spotted it. But when you were invited to look at it another way you saw something different—a rabbit. Both ways of perceiving are valid. As you were encouraged to look at the image in another, more specific way—you did. Afterward, your perception included both ways of seeing. As you changed the way you looked at it, the thing you looked at changed.

This is what we are after—a shifting perspective. Once we realize there is another way of seeing, we then have a choice, about how it is seen. When something happens to put us in a bad mood, the world can seem barren and redundant. But when we are invited to shift our perception just slightly and asked to look at it through a different lens, something changes. We see the world differently, and can respond to it with more positivity.

What is important about this exercise is that the image you were looking at never changed—you just looked at it differently. It appeared to you differently because you changed your perspective. In the same way, shifting your perception can lead to seeing the world in a more hopeful way. We can’t change what we’re looking at, but we can choose our perspective. This is the essential ingredient if you want to change how you feel.

Having hope is different from having faith that something, or someone, external will come to our rescue. Instead, it gives us the power to change our lives—which we can continually draw on throughout our lives. This distinction is important for your sense of agency and motivation to change the way your brain works.
Myth #3: Hope is the same as faith.

Fact: Hope is when we believe we can positively impact our future. Faith is when we believe something else will.

Seven Decisions That Generate (Or Limit) Hope

Research has shown that focusing on what’s wrong prevents us from seeing what’s strong. This brings to light another misconception.

Myth #4: Your circumstance regulates how much hope you have.

Fact: You can adjust your aspirations and goals to regulate how much hope you have.

With hope, depression can become a catalyst for change, anxiety can be transformed into courage, and even trauma can be an opportunity for tremendous personal growth. The key is knowing that, either way, a decision is being made about how much influence you have in creating a better future. These decisions can put us in a better place spiritually, mentally, and physically—or send us into a downward spiral.

I’ve observed there are seven of these decisions. Progress in making one decision facilitates other high-hope decisions. In the same way beginning an exercise program might make you more thoughtful about what you eat, initiating one good decision supports making others.
Decisions That Limit Hope | High-Hope Decisions
---|---
Seeing things as fixed and unchangeable | Seeing possibilities
Focusing on the negative | Noticing beauty, benefits, and blessings
Settling on habits of negativity | Cultivating positive feelings
Concentrating on weaknesses | Focusing on strengths
Remaining unengaged and unchallenged | Creating challenging goals
Lacking a sense of meaning and a sense of mattering in life | Finding purpose
Remaining isolated and serving only self-interests | Cherishing relationships

Like the different sounds of an orchestra that together make a harmony, each of the decisions contributes something to the whole. Thus, this book has a chapter devoted to each.

**Hope Is Assessing the Future and Influencing It**

Hopefulness has several features that can be developed. As positive psychologist and MacArthur genius Angela Duckworth has said: “*I have a feeling tomorrow will be better* is different from *I resolve to make tomorrow better.*”

By reading this book, you hope to learn something that changes what you feel is possible. Cultivating hope focuses on the future in a more proactive way than depression. Fight, flight, or freeze are focused on controlling the present. Hope assesses our degree of control over the future, and then chooses the optimal way to respond. While hope’s essential ingredients are the same negativity
or uncertainty as depression, it repurposes them toward something constructive.

Depression appears to be an evolutionary reaction to a chronically difficult situation, when we believe we have nothing left to try. We give up, shut down, and conserve whatever it is we suppose we have left, no longer interested in optimizing our future.

While negative emotions pull us into the present and the past, they, like hope, are assessing our future—but the assessment is dismissive. With depression our assessment is *Why bother?* It tells us not to put more energy into future plans.

Hope is different. Hope forecasts possibilities. While it grows out of the same dynamics that create depression, it looks at alternatives *toward* the goal, rather than retreat from it. Making better decisions about how we perceive and what we do with these dynamics moves us forward toward hope. You can get angry, retreat, give up altogether, or find hope.

One of the secret ingredients of hope is recalibration. For example, when you saw this title, *Learned Hopefulness*, you might have thought, *Yeah, right.* Or you might have thought *Sounds interesting.* Whatever your initial reaction, you ended up with this book in your hands, and you’re reading it right now. You took a step toward *possibility.* Doubtful thoughts and feelings might have made the choice harder; curious thoughts and feelings might have made it easier.

But it was the act that counted. Whether you were conscious of it or not, the act started you on a path of possibility. Other acts followed, building on each other: clicking the “buy” button, opening the book and starting to read, finding a paper scrap to mark your place, and so on. Bit by bit, without making a big deal or overthinking it, you’ve moved in a positive direction.

There is a “natural self” and a “habitual” self. No infant is born thinking to itself *Why bother?* Our natural state is curiosity, wanting
to learn how to grow, hoping for some influence over our future. Our interpretation of experience produces a habit of thought, and habits are decisions that can be changed. We remain stuck in our depression when we continue these thought habits, and knowing they are habits gives us the power to transform them.

Hope is coming back to a natural self—to what is already there. In positive psychology terms, our ability to change is a series of tiny steps along a cobblestone path of positive possibility. When you make a habit of hope, all the little positive choices become easy, even automatic. That is learned hopefulness.

**Apply Shifts in Perspective to Imagine Anew**

When we stop believing in ourselves and our goals, we don’t try to make things better. Think of the times you’ve given up: a job, a relationship, a condition jammed you up and caused you to dwell on what went wrong, the injustice of it, the pain. Even if giving up is the best thing, it is our assessment of the future that causes the sadness. We get depressed because we can’t see how to make things better. *When negativity and uncertainty are seen as obstacles, they keep us stuck and lead to depression.*

We decide based on our assessment, and our assessment is informed by our perception. If we can look at our situation in a slightly different way, our perception changes. We can then either make modifications in how we will get to our goal, or recalibrate to a different goal to shoot for. *When negativity and uncertainty are seen as indications of a need to summon our strengths, we change our aspirations or methods.*

Each of the seven decisions in this book will require altering your perspective. Just as light passing through a prism transforms into different colors naturally, we will be filtering old habits of thought through the prism of perspective.
When we look at the world through a different lens, we can restore our natural curiosity and agency. This shift helps us make the seven decisions that lead to hope. Hope needs energy to arise. Where is that energy going to come from? If you see the glass as half empty, it’s hard to find enthusiasm. Someone telling you to see it as half full typically doesn’t help much. The real shift happens when you realize your glass is refillable.

According to research by Barbara Fredrickson,21 positive emotions generate energy. Think of the last time you were out at a concert, a sporting event, or laughing with your friends. When you feel good, you are energized. We want to refill our glass with positive emotions.

Positive feelings generate the desire for what Dr. Fredrickson calls “broaden and build.” Exercised regularly, the willingness to make changes, see other things differently, and challenge our perceptions take on a life of their own, becoming effortless because of the energy they create. In her book Positivity22 Dr. Fredrickson explains that you want to use the techniques in new ways (broaden) and add new techniques to feel better (build). In contrast to the downward spiral of depression, this creates and an upward spiral of positivity.

**Noticing and Activating Positive Emotions**

Once a perception or a way of thinking is challenged, the possibilities need to be nourished. This is where using positive emotions becomes essential. I’ve found it useful to think about positive emotions in relation to time:

- the past (serenity, gratitude, satisfaction, pride, forgiveness)
• the present (interest, pleasure, savoring, awe, joy, amusement, mindfulness, and kindness)

• the future (hope, optimism, inspiration, faith)

Of course, these categories are not mutually exclusive. As an example, untangling from the past via forgiveness allows us to be more kind in the present. When we are clouded by negativity generated from a past hurt it is more difficult to see the good in the present. In contrast, when we feel optimism, it is related to our future.

At the very core of the research into positive emotions is the study of how to activate them. Think about it this way. If you were asked to help make someone more depressed, what would you tell them to do? You’d tell them to ruminate about the things that bother them, make sure they stay isolated, listen to news about horrible things they can’t do anything about, and worry as much as possible. It may sound funny, but this is a way to understand how interventions, activities, and conditions work to create a result.

Positive interventions, like the ones you’ll practice in this book, make us feel better, and feeling better leads to wanting more good feeling. Therefore, shifting perspective is about learning to continually seek out ways to view the world through a different lens. Through these cumulative moments, hope emerges as a natural outcome.

Feeling better about a situation is good, but cultivating hope makes life worth living. At the core of cultivating hope is attending to what we’ve overlooked. We are not fabricating something to be positive about, but rather, balancing out our negativity bias, which has us obsess about what’s wrong. This bias can be changed when we highlight the good things already present in our life.

We pass by good things all the time without noticing them. Wonderful things happen to us, but get eclipsed by our negativity or swallowed up by our to-do list. We can correct this by shifting what
Learned Hopefulness

we attend to—and in doing so, we change our expectations and experience.

**Shifting Attention to Change Your Stories**

It can be difficult to take in positivity when you’re in a crummy mood—like looking for the sun when it’s nighttime. The sun is there, but there are too many clouds to see it. Dwelling on past wrongs can create a storm of negative thinking.

What helps is assessing what resources can be brought into the moment—deliberately trying to look at the situation in another way. If it’s stormy, you need shelter and safety. Looking for resources in the present moment is essential—and it’s a skill that can be learned. Activating the resources that you have immediate access to is crucial. Like the man in Penn Station who pointed the violin out to the homeless man, so he too could focus on something good, gratitude is a resource that can point out our negative habits of mind.

Studies by Sonya Lyubomirsky and her colleagues have shown the power of our thoughts and actions on how we feel. This is not only true of the present moment and the future—it is also true about how we think of the past. Leading psychologist Phil Zimbardo echoes this perspective when he says: “While no one can change events that occurred in the past, everyone can change attitudes and beliefs about them.”

How we think about our past, and the story we tell ourselves about it, is also the concern of cognitive psychologist and Nobel Prize–winner Daniel Kahneman. Dr. Kahneman believes that our life satisfaction is influenced by what we remember of the story we tell ourselves about our lives. He contends that our experience is one thing and our memory of it is another. The deliberate decision to think, act, and recall in particular ways can influence our hope, happiness, and life satisfaction. Choosing to think about the better
parts of our life experience will serve us better. This exercise offers you an opportunity to try out this shift in perspective.

**Exploration: An Attitude of Gratitude**

**Brightens What You Notice**

Get your journal and try this out for yourself.

**Step 1:** List everything you can remember doing yesterday. Don’t leave anything off—even if it was just doing chores like taking out the garbage or washing dishes. Then set this list aside.

**Step 2:** On a fresh piece of paper, write about that same time period through the lens of gratitude. Think back to the past twenty-four to thirty-six hours and come up with at least three things that you feel thankful for. The more specific, the better. If you’re grateful because the weather was beautiful yesterday, that’s good, but if you took a walk because it was nice outside and ran into a friend you hadn’t seen in a while, that would be even better. You may recall things that were not on your list in Step 1.

**Step 3:** Look at the two lists. If you’re like most people, your memory of yesterday in Step 1 was rather matter-of-fact, recalled through a habitual lens. The first list was constructed based on how your brain typically functions—with a negativity bias in place. But when looked at through the lens of gratitude in Step 2, the day becomes highlighted by positivity. A so-so day likely gets better, or a good day enhanced. Has your overall sense of how your day went shifted?

When you were invited to look at the same day through the lens of gratitude, that created a shift in perception. You noticed events that happened, but hadn’t been perceived, or at least hadn’t been emphasized. Once you notice the positive, your whole perception of the day shifts, in the same way that after you are invited to see the rabbit you no longer only see the duck.
Gratitude Changes Your Brain Structure

There is some very wise science behind the saying “Count your blessings.” When we focus, acknowledge, and savor the good things that have happened, we are changing the structure of our brain. This ability for the brain to change is called neuroplasticity. Brain science tells us that recalling these events differently not only changes our memory of what happened—it also changes the brain structure the memory is stored in. Seeing things through the lens of gratitude changes the biochemistry and neural pathways in our brain. Highlighting the good stuff helps to balance out the difficult things.

Once our brain has learned it can view things differently, it will start to see more positivity on its own. In the exercise, when you looked at your first list again, perhaps new possibilities arose. You may have viewed neutral or negative events with a more generous lens, and positive experiences were enhanced. If it wasn’t such a good day, this exercise has likely elevated it in your memory; if it was good, you got to savor it and enhance your good feelings about it. Either way, gratitude for what is already in your life is your most immediate resource to shift your perspective toward the positive.

Even if your evaluation of the day didn’t change in this exercise, you have begun the shift in your brain. In the beginning, we have to intentionally seek out gratitude and practice seeing it. Some positive psychology practitioners have called this “hunting the good.” The brain has a default mode, so we typically think and do what we did the last time. Changing the brain’s default requires attention and effort. Your brain changes because your perception shifts. When you change the way you look at things, the brain you look with changes.

The good things were already there, you just had to acknowledge them. Although you were looking at the same day, another way of seeing it allowed you to view it in a new way. This brings up
another misconception about hope—that it is manufactured or invented.

**Myth #5:** Having hope changes what we believe.

**Fact:** Hope is informed and primed by our beliefs.

Causes for hope are always present, we just need to believe they can be present within our experience.29 This is why a regular gratitude practice is so important—it’s an intentional effort at well-being. Altering how we view past events helps us in the present and the future. Gratitude not only changes the memory of yesterday, it also changes how you feel at the moment—and participants in studies that practice reflective gratitude, as we just did, reported a significantly more positive life.30 Not a bad payoff for viewing your day through the gratitude lens.

Research on positive emotions shows they change our brain and body chemistry.31 It’s a choice we all have, to shine a light on the more positive features of each day and thus change our feelings, brain, and outlook. Gratitude can be generated through cognitive means such as reflection, and through expressive means such as journaling. And there is one more step that can make the experience of gratitude even more profound—telling another person.

**Exploration: Share Your Gratitude with Others**

When I invite people to share their gratitude with another person, the simple act of interaction is deeply energizing. People enjoy telling others about the good things that have happened to them. It stimulates an upward spiral. You could even find a gratitude partner to share with in an ongoing way.

Another way to share is to write a letter of gratitude to someone.32 This requires a cognitive review of past events and acts that inspire gratitude,
expressing it by writing it down, and interacting with another by delivering the message. I encourage you to think of those you have gratitude for and write them a note, give them a call, or go knock on their door. It’s one of the best things you can do to enhance everyone’s well-being.

We’ve dug the foundation, and now we’re ready to build hopefulness. Each of the seven decisions that follow are choices we can make to improve how we see and live in the world. Collectively, these decisions generate high hope. Old patterns of thought can deceive us into thinking that we don’t have a choice about what we are experiencing—but we do. In the words of William James: “When you have to make a choice and don’t make it, that is in itself a choice.” The choices you are making and your acts of intentional well-being are powerful, because hope is never further away than your next thought.