

your hopelessness, I want to share with you what I know of hopelessness, where it comes from, and what you might do to put an end to it.

As I have told many clients over the years, I wish I could give them an injection of hope or a handful of hope pills or direct them to a book to read that would give them that priceless relief from their sense of despair. And I wish whatever I might do for them would work in minutes, not days or weeks or months. (Such are the fantasies of therapists.) But, unfortunately, the passing of hope from one person to another is not so easy. It takes time and losses and failures and repeated defeats to fall into the hole of hopelessness and, in turn, it takes time and winning and successes to climb out again. But it can be done. It is done.

As a professional psychologist, I cannot ethically recommend a specific religious solution to hopelessness. But I am sure that, for some, this is the solution. And if finding a way to your God is what you need, then I strongly encourage you to begin that journey. And to begin it now.

### Where Does Hopelessness Come From?

One thing I want you to know about hopelessness is that you do not have to be depressed to feel hopeless. Many, if not most, depressed people experience some degree of hopelessness. But hopelessness can overtake any of us. And hopelessness, research has shown, is a more common thread among the majority of those who select the suicide option. Despairing of any future or solution to their problems, the utterly hopeless frequently find themselves thinking, "What's the use? I might as well be dead."

To help you understand hopelessness, I will rely on the work of several psychologists whose ideas and research have done much to shed light on this most vexing state of mind. Martin Seligman, Aaron Beck, and many others have been working to understand a concept they call "learned helplessness." ~~Learned~~

# 11

## Too Hopeless to Hope

In many fields of medicine just now researchers are looking for what are called "magic bullets." A magic bullet is a drug that specifically attacks and destroys the disease-causing agent or virus or process that is threatening the patient's life. Unfortunately, modern psychiatry and psychology have few magic bullets. But, if those of us in the helping professions could pick one from among all the magic bullets that might one day be found, you can bet we would all pray the first one they find is the one that destroys hopelessness.

Whatever other emotions you may be feeling now — depression, anger, loneliness, or a terrible sense of loss — none would worry me more than if you are feeling your situation is hopeless. And the reason for my concern is that despite whatever other emotional state you may be in, the state of hopelessness is the most dangerous one. ~~Because to be without hope is to be despairing of my future, of any relief, any cure, and of any promise that things will ever change for the better. And it is from this frame of mind that this sense of utter discouragement, that thoughts of suicide grow strong and robust and take on the shape of an acceptable, if final, solution.~~

So if you are feeling too hopeless to hope, I won't kid you, I am worried for you. And although I have no magic bullet for

helplessness means just what it says; that people, by experiencing repeated failures when they try to change their world, eventually learn that no matter what they try to do, they are helpless to control events in their lives. And, once they feel they are helpless to control their own futures, they fall quickly into a state of depression and the associated frame of mind called hopelessness. Here, in a nutshell, is how learned helplessness occurs. Excluding those people whose depressions may be biological in nature, the great majority of those of us who become depressed or dispirited become so in response to the loss of a loved one, or because of our failure to succeed in work or school, or through financial setbacks or because, for whatever reason, we come to believe that no matter how hard we try, our trying doesn't matter. Even successful people can come to believe that it isn't how hard you try, but the lucky breaks you get that make the difference in the happiness equation.

This feeling that whatever you do doesn't matter is at the heart of learned helplessness. It is as if, after you have been clobbered again and again by life, you come to believe that bad things *just happen* to you and there is *nothing* you can do to prevent them from happening. And, once you have arrived in this strange world where your efforts to change or control it don't matter, it is as if you have stepped into a sense of hopelessness.

Sheila, a depressed young woman I had worked with for several weeks, summed up her state of helplessness and hopelessness in a few short sentences. "It's as if I am cursed," she said. "I tried to talk to my boyfriend about our problem. But he wouldn't listen. I've interviewed for a dozen jobs, but nobody will hire me. I go on a diet and gain weight. The other day I stumbled and broke a bone in my ankle. Now I can't even look for work. It seems like the harder I try, the more I fail. It's hopeless, that's what it is."

Sheila, though she didn't know it, fitted the pattern of learned helplessness perfectly. She had been trying to get her life together,

er, but nothing was working. And, after several months of trying, she had come to the conclusion that no matter what she did, she was going to fail. Then, to try to minimize her sense of failure and contain the losses to her self-esteem, she began to predict that she would fail even before she tried. "Now," she said, "when I go to a job interview, I know they're not going to hire me. I know it before I go into their office and I can see it immediately in their faces. And, you know, I think they can see it in my face, too."

Sheila was right. After experiencing a long string of failures, it becomes easier and easier to predict your own future. The safest prediction, given your own history, is to predict that you will fail again. And, once you begin to predict your own failures, you won't be disappointed because, though you may not be aware of it, you will begin to do things to ensure those failures. As Sheila said, "Even before he might have offered me the job, I told the last employer I interviewed with that I would understand if he didn't have anything for me. I guess I helped make up his mind for him. Stupid, huh?"

What Sheila did may have been stupid, but it made sense for her. By anticipating a rejection, she cushioned her next fall. But this is the psychology of learned helplessness and it can be more blunt about it: the psychology of the loser.

Sheila was not a loser. She had been a successful high-school student, earning honors in debate. She had worked her own way through two years of business school and done very well. She had learned to play the guitar on her own. She had helped her mother get back on her feet after her father had died. She had, in a word, done a great many things that, from an objective point of view, could be termed successes. But, and here is the key, she had not done anything she thought of as successful *recently*. One failure had followed another and, in the course of a few months' time, she had come to the only logical conclusion available to her: that she was doomed to fail.

## Born Loser?

One of the great things human beings are able to do is to rewrite their own histories. All of us do it all the time. We take a few liberties with the grades we "remember" earning in high school. In filling out an application for employment, we "remember" that we worked at some job or other for a year when, in fact, it was only nine months. We "remember" that we jilted our first girlfriend and that it was not the other way around. These little distortions in what we recall tend to fit our needs at the moment. And, so long as what we remember doesn't harm anyone, no one really much cares how we rewrite our own pasts.

But, consider for a moment what happens when we are undergoing losses and setbacks and failures at an unprecedented pace? What if things are happening to us that, even though we try to get control of them, we are unable to? And what happens if these things go on and on and on for a period of weeks and months? Do we not begin to feel that we are helpless or that things are hopeless? I think we can.

Now then, since we are all prone to rewriting our own histories couldn't we, when things are at their worst, begin to wonder if we are not losers? And if we are losers today, haven't we always been? And if we have always been losers, doesn't that mean we were born losers?

Right or wrong, logical or illogical, once you have decided that you are a born loser, everything in life becomes much simpler—more miserable and more hopeless, but simpler.

No one expects much from born losers. Born losers don't expect much from themselves. Born losers don't respect anything from anyone else. Born losers don't have to try. Born losers don't have to get up in the morning. Born losers don't need to worry about people loving them or them loving others because, as everyone knows, a born loser loses in the love department, too. A born loser, by definition, does not hope—because to do so

would be to dream of a better tomorrow. And we all know that born losers do not deserve better tomorrows because, after all, they were born to lose.

If there is a motto for people suffering from hopelessness it is, Born to Lose. And, during the years I consulted for a prison, I saw this motto tattooed on many an inmate's forearm. "Sure I'm a loser," these fellows would say. "Why do you think I'm doing time?"

But there is a terrible price to pay for thinking of oneself as a born loser—and that price is hopelessness. Not only does one begin to live out the self-fulfilling prophecy that says, "Once a loser, always a loser," one must also do everything within one's power to keep this identity going until, one day, one arrives at that place where there is no pointing on.

I don't know who gives birth to losers, but I have yet to meet the parents of one. True, you find parents who tell their kids, "You're nothing and you never will be," but mostly I believe born losers give themselves that dubious title out of a sense of learned helplessness, a sense that no matter what they do, it will make no difference.

So, if you have begun to feel hopeless, please don't take the next seemingly logical step. Don't fall into the trap that says, "Things are hopeless, things have always been hopeless, and, therefore, they will always be hopeless." To do so will require you to take the next step and begin to rewrite your own history so that it makes sense. If you believe the logic that "as things are now, they have always been and will always be," then there must be something wrong with you. And that something is that "You must be hopeless."

To qualify as a hopeless case, you will need some kind of new label for yourself, some kind of loser title. Zero man, failure, dud, schlemiel, there are many to choose from. I hope you haven't done this yet. But if you have, maybe it is time to reconsider. Maybe it is time to rethink how you came to feel hopeless and to do something to change this state of mind.

## Problems, Problems, Problems

You and I know both know we all have problems. Little ones, daily ones, and those that come in jumbo sizes. Everyone, but everyone, has problems—the rich and healthy, the poor and sick, everyone. It is not possible to live life and not have problems.

But consider for a moment that to the hopeful, a problem is a challenge, a chance to find a solution that will work, but to the hopeless, a problem is just another opportunity for defeat. This is the basic difference between the hopeful and hopeless—one sees the problem as an opportunity to win, the other as an opportunity to lose. And therefore, at least in my view, a problem is what you make it.

In my professional work with clients I have come to recognize the earmarks of hopeless thinking and how hopeless people view the problems in their lives. Here are some examples:

“I know I should get out of my marriage, but I’d probably just marry an alcoholic like Fred again.”

“I know my job is killing me, but then most people don’t like their work. So why should I go to all the bother?”

“I know I ought to lose weight but, shoot, I know myself. I’d just put it on again.”

These people are stuck in a hopeless attitude. They see the problem, but they already know the outcome. They know, without a doubt, that they will fail. And so, they ask, why try?

Good question. If I believed as some of my clients do—that there is no outcome to a problem but failure—then I know my work would be useless and I’d be better off selling used cars. But I don’t believe my work is useless. And I don’t believe my clients are as hopeless as they believe they are. My job, in working with lots of hopeless people, is to shake them up, challenge the way they have come to think about their problems, and to get them to see things differently.

I don’t know if you are in this spot or not, but my guess is that if you have been feeling hopeless about your situation, then you

may have developed a similar attitude. And, if you have been considering the suicide decision, then I can be almost certain that, at least in some areas of your life, you have chosen to believe that failure is the only sure outcome you can expect.

So, in the rest of this chapter, I want to challenge you on your thinking. I want to shake you up. And, if I can, I want you to consider that, as a human being who has experienced a lot of setbacks lately, you may have rewritten your own history to fit the facts as they seem to you today.

Have you ever wondered why some rich and famous person killed himself? Have you ever wondered aloud, “Why would she? She seemed to have everything, and everything to live for.”

A better question might be, “What was she so hopeless about?” Because in asking this question, you would most likely find the answer to the important question. Yes, she had a problem. Yes, it seemed insoluble to her. And, yes, despite her wealth and health and seeming success, she chose the suicide decision. I think if we could know the truth about this person, we would find a feeling of hopelessness had overwhelmed her and that, at the bottom of her final decision, she saw her problem as having only one outcome—failure.

It is, then, this sense of certain failure that prompts people to think about suicide. It is this feeling of impending doom of unavoidable catastrophe that puts us in the frame of mind where suicide seems so appealing. We can, literally, convince ourselves that defeat is assured and the only thing left to us is to avoid it by killing ourselves.

But wait a minute. I would like to make an alternate case. I would like to make the case that a problem, any problem, can have more than one outcome. Further, I would like to make the case that it is not the absence of problems in our lives that makes us happy, but feeling that we have the power to solve those problems. Problems, in and of themselves, are nothing special. They are as common as rain, and we get them no matter the season. It is not our problems that bring us down; it is, rather,

how we think of them and what we do about them that makes the difference.

### The Case for Personal Power

Do you remember when you first learned to ride a bike? Remember what a problem it was to get that crazy mechanical device to go on two wheels when, clearly, it needed four? You had to defy nothing less than the law of gravity to stay up there. But what, if you kept trying, finally happened?

Sure, you fell down. Sure, you skinned an elbow or knee. And, yes, you were on the ground more than you were in the air on your first few tries. But then, gradually, you found your balance. You found that you had to keep pumping and going forward if you were to keep from falling down. And then, as if by magic, you made the goofy thing go for a few feet in a semistraight line. Then a hundred feet. Then around the block or down the lane. And soon, within a matter of a few hours, you were feeling like the Master of the Universe, zooming down the road like you owned it.

This feeling, this sense of being the Master of the Universe, is what we all search for in everything we do. It is nothing less than the most wonderful feeling we can know. It is power. It is personal power. It is control. It is taking hold of the problem with both hands and forcing it to scream, "Unleash!" It is, to my way of thinking, the first, best, and only cure for that sense of helplessness and the state of hopelessness.

But learning to ride a bicycle is easy compared to my problems, you say. Anyone can learn to ride a bike, you argue.

Maybe so. But if you could remember back to the first instant you tried to balance yourself on two wheels, I think you would find that that feeling and those you are having now about some other kind of "insurmountable" problem, are exactly the same feelings. The sense of impending disaster, the gut-level knowledge that "it can't be done," and the negative self-talk that says, "I can't do this" — all should be familiar feelings. They accompa-

ny most every difficult thing we try for the first time. Such feelings, I would argue, go with the territory of being a member of the human race.

But should such feelings stop us? Because we fall down, should we never try to walk, or to ride a bike, or fall in love? Because a problem is set before us, should we find a way around it or seek to avoid it because we might get hurt? Should we say, "It can't be solved, so why try?"

If you had let those feelings and fears of failure defeat you the first time you got up on two wheels, would you have ever learned to ride a bike? No, of course not.

If you had let your feelings make the decision to go out on a first date, would you have ever gone? Probably not.

If your teacher hadn't encouraged you or insisted that you get up in front of your grade-school class and give your first talk, would you have ever done it? Not likely.

And so it goes with almost anything frightening we ever had to do for the first time. We had to, you and I, do the thing we feared *in spite* of how we felt. We had to act! We had to put our feelings to one side and do the thing! Consequences be damned.

And the next time we did it, we felt a little better. And the next time, a little better still. And by the tenth time we did it, we felt, "Hey, this is easy. What was I so worried about?"

And so the last part of my case is that ~~none of us can afford to have our fears govern our lives. If we let our fears tell us we cannot solve a problem, then it is not an easy thing to say to ourselves, "Why try?" And if we answer our why-try question by not trying, then are we not saying that our case is hopeless?~~

### Out of Hopelessness

Now comes the hard part: How to get out of hopelessness.

My mother was and is a terrific therapist. She has a theory about how to live life that, most likely, grew out of her childhood on an Iowa farm. It went like this: No matter what else you have

to do in a day, always accomplish something before breakfast. That way, no matter how badly things go, you can always look back and see that you did something worthwhile and that the day was not a total loss.

And of all things I have read about the treatment of depression and helplessness, this advice comes as close to the beginnings of a cure as anything the learned professionals have had to say on the subject. Mother's "before breakfast" formula has two important ingredients.

One, you set a small goal and achieve it. It may be washing the car or sewing on a missing button or writing a letter to friend or reading a chapter in a book — almost anything that needs doing for your sake or for the sake of someone else. Whatever it is, it need not be difficult or monumental. It only needs doing. And you get it done! Finished! Complete!

Then, in the second part, at the end of the day (or whenever you feel the dragons are about to devour you), you look back on that small but accomplished goal and say to yourself, "At least I did it today! And on an empty stomach!"

This little antidote for helplessness is not so little. Because doing something small, achievable, and getting it done (and patting ourselves on the back a bit) gives us something invaluable. And that something is a sense of control and accomplishment. I cannot overemphasize how important these feelings are to each of us, and especially to you if you are feeling a sense of helplessness. Getting something done, even if it is a small thing, returns power to our lives.

It is very difficult some days to feel that anything any of us do will make any difference at all in the big scheme of things. If you read the newspapers and what is happening or about to happen with pollution, nuclear accidents, wars, famine, the debt crisis, and the fact that what you thought was safe to eat yesterday will cause you to develop cancer tomorrow, it is very easy to fall into a sense of helplessness and, if things begin to go wrong in your personal life, a sense of helplessness.

But I am not concerned here with whether or not the entire human race is on a collision with itself or that, if we don't change our ways soon, the planet won't be a fit place on which to live. These are things which, even though I try to make some small difference in these conditions each day, I know that I have, in the end, very little control over where mankind is headed or how he is likely to end up. Rather, it is what you and I do have control over that concerns me. What we eat, what work we do, how we care for ourselves and others, what we can do to make our lives more interesting and rewarding and challenging and how, however we choose to, we approach our true potential as human beings — these are things that interest me. In a word, the world needs more winners, not losers — born or otherwise.

So, if you would decide to do something about your sense of helplessness, how might you proceed? Assuming you would not seek out a therapist to help you and that you are not so depressed that the idea of even trying something seems impossible, then I think you might proceed as follows:

(1) Set one small goal for tomorrow. Anything will do. Clean the bathroom. Straighten up a closet or drawer that needs it. Write a letter to someone. Wash, wax, and vacuum the car. Have your hair done. Polish the silver. Call a friend who'd like to hear from you. In a word, set up a surefire goal that you know you can absolutely get done. It can be something you've done a hundred times before.

(2) Then, tomorrow, don't hesitate. Don't stall. Don't talk yourself out of doing it. Just do it. And use the K-I-S-S method which stands for, KEEP IT SIMPLE, STUPID. You don't need to end the cold war or stop hunger in the world or find a new job or a different lover, you just need to wash the car.

(3) Then, when you've done what you set out to do, reward yourself. Not tomorrow. Not next week. I mean right now! You may be out of practice with rewarding yourself, but that is exactly what you need to do. It's nice to have others reward us for our good deeds, but if you haven't noticed lately, a lot of our friends

and family seem to be missing their cues. So, in the short run, you'll need to do this little job for yourself. It doesn't hurt a bit. It may feel a little strange at first, but it doesn't hurt.

(4) Now, for the next day, and the next day, and the day after that, I want you to set more little goals. And more. And then a few more. And, maybe sooner than we know, we'll have the whole house clean, the newspapers tossed out, the car waxed, the drawers all neat and tidy, that novel read, and that call to Aunt Margaret made.

(5) At the end of each day, and no matter how poorly things have gone or how miserable you seem to feel, force yourself to remember that you accomplished at least one thing that you set out to accomplish for the day. Say to yourself that no matter what else didn't go right, at least I got X done. It will be true. And it should feel good.

If you're getting my drift here, I think you'll see what I'm up to. What I want to happen for you is nothing less than a cure for helplessness and an antidote against hopelessness. Because (and you can call this bootstrap therapy if you wish), I know that if you will start to take these small and seemingly unimportant steps to get control of that part of your life that you *can* control, you will begin to feel that you do, in fact, have some power over your life. And when you accomplish these little tasks, you really do. And no one, but no one, can take that feeling away from you.

More importantly, you will begin to feel that sense of personal mastery returning. And personal mastery, that feeling of being in charge of your own destiny is, from my point of view, as essential to your health — mental and otherwise — as food, water, and air and love.

Then something else will begin to happen. Once you begin to take charge of the little problems in your life, the bigger problems will begin to shrink. Not because they've gotten smaller on their own, but because you are not the same helpless, hopeless person you were a few days or weeks ago. And, if you keep

knocking down the little problems, I think you will find the big ones will begin to fall as well.

The reason this will happen is not complicated. And how it happens is not some new and unknown psychological phenomenon. People have been writing and talking about this same process for years. But writing and talking about building self-confidence and self-esteem (or even understanding how one gets hold of one's life), doesn't mean a thing if the persons needing to do this for themselves don't act.

So here is the challenge.

Before you dismiss my suggestions here, I will guess that while you have been reading this you have been saying such things as, "Ah, he makes it sound so easy. It isn't." Or, "If he only knew me, he wouldn't say such dumb things." Or, "This is fine advice for someone else, but not me."

Because, you see, I know you. I know how hopeless people have trained themselves to think. I know that what they have experienced lately has led them to certain negative thoughts — a mode of thinking that is nothing short of deadly. And I know that, within just a few minutes from now, you will try to convince yourself that nothing I've suggested here is worth trying because, after all, I can't possibly know how truly hopeless you are.

That is exactly what I expect you to do. And that's okay. Go ahead and give it your best shot.

But when you've finished trying to convince yourself you can't possibly set one small goal and accomplish it, please consider one more thing: You did just read this entire chapter! You did, in spite of yourself, finish this one small task. Is that not a goal accomplished? Is that not a thing done you set out to do? And, now that you have done it, have you not begun to take some control over your life and exercise some personal power? Your answer has to be yes.

I don't mean to be clever or to trick you or in any way suggest that by finishing the reading of this chapter you are on your way

out of the hopelessness hole. But I will say that by doing this much—however little it may seem—it is still a task that is now done, and that it is a positive thing. And if you will agree with me that it is a positive thing, then I hope you will agree with me that there must be some kernel of hope left somewhere deep inside you. Otherwise, why would you continue reading?

Maybe it would help you to know that many of the most utterly hopeless people I have ever known have managed to keep their therapy appointments with me. And that this single act—despite what their eyes and words said—was proof to me that they continued to hope for some better tomorrow.

And so I hope it is with you and your reading of this book. I know if you will but give yourself the benefit of the doubt and do something positive—be it small, be it insignificant, be it an old familiar routine—the important thing is that you *do* it. Because when you do, ~~when you begin to act on your own behalf, you will begin to feel stronger, think stronger, act stronger, and you will have begun to take the first steps up and out of the hole of hopelessness.~~

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## Drugs, Booze, and Fatal Mistakes

If you don't now, never have, and never intend to use drugs or alcohol, you might want to skip this chapter. But if you do use drugs or alcohol or prescribed medications (especially sleeping pills, antidepressants or minor tranquilizers), then stay with me.

The reason this chapter is important to you is that if you use any of the above chemicals (especially if you use drugs *and* drink alcohol together) and you are thinking about suicide, then you are walking on a very narrow ledge with your shoelaces untied.

But first I want to ask you to do something: Don't read this chapter if you're high or loaded or stoned right now. I have a rule in my office and it goes like this: I only work with people who bring their whole brain to the appointment. It is difficult enough to come to understand ourselves and to learn new ways of getting on in this world without complicating the job by being high on chemicals. You'd be paying for all of my attention, and I want all of yours.

So, if you're under the influence right now, do yourself a favor and put this book down for now. Then pick it up later when your head is clear. (If you are taking a prescribed medication, okay. I will talk about prescribed medications in a bit later on.)

Good. Now we have two complete brains in the same place. You already know that drugs and alcohol are both powerful