
HOPELESSNESS

by

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I believe that hopelessness is often one of the key components of depression, and that to track it down, to recognize and acknowledge it, and to confront it, can transform a person's life from misery to creative and purposeful living. I am speaking from ten years' experience of working with people on this issue, and also (inevitably) from confronting my own hopelessness.

Hopelessness is enormously complex. It is hedged about with evasions, subterfuges, false hopes - a thousand ways of **not** being hopeless. All of these have to be dealt with before somebody's true hopelessness can be revealed - because they have probably spent a lifetime concealing it from other people and from themselves. We can't just rip off the mask (persona) that conceals hopelessness - everybody's particular form of escape from it has to be respected. It protected them at one time from the terrible and unbearable nature of hopelessness, and with good reason.

Hopelessness is doubly complex because it attains a quasi-autonomous psychic existence. By this, I mean to say that it **evades**

recognition and confrontation. It is to a degree **separate** from the individual ego, and becomes a cunning and talented opponent and saboteur. Above all, it does not want to be exposed and dealt with, and will present innumerable suggestions as to why this should not happen - and again, all of these have to be dealt with. Why does our hopelessness **protect** itself in this way? **Simply** because, as an autonomous entity in the psyche, it jealously **guards** this independence; it **refuses** to become integrated as part of the conscious personality, and hence subordinate to the whole.

The origin of hopelessness is always real and realistic. I mean to say that the hopeless individual was once in a truly hopeless situation, usually in childhood. It involved a lack of love, not being seen or recognized or valued, not being held or nourished - at any rate, some fundamental lack. In such a situation, the child feels hopeless, but it is generally actually impossible to feel the hopelessness, partly because hopelessness is probably too powerful a feeling for a child to bear anyway. It threatens our very psychic existence; it swamps us and annihilates

our individuality; so it is shoved down out of consciousness, and remains, ticking like a time-bomb. It follows that in any successful confrontation with hopelessness, the original hopeless situation has to be re-experienced and investigated.

Although we carry our hopelessness with us from childhood as unconscious baggage, it has a pervasive influence on our life. In fact, precisely because it is unconscious, its influence will be the stronger, because the individual will become unconsciously identified with it, and will live and breathe and speak hopelessness, whilst remaining unaware of this, until it is pointed out by others.

With such powerful unconscious feelings, two things tend to happen. The individual gravitates towards hopeless situations, thus recreating or re-enacting the original situation. Let me stress that this is not a conscious act - the unconscious feeling **recreates itself** and impels the individual towards certain situations and certain people which will make him/her feel hopeless. Such is the autonomous power of hopelessness. In a sense it **demand**s recognition by constantly presenting an image of itself to us in our life, whilst at the same time **resist**ing recognition by struggling to remain unconscious.

The other process that goes on is the escape from hopelessness. As well as being driven to hopeless situations - relationships, marriages, jobs and so on - the individual **puts** on a mask of false

cheerfulness, false hope, 'positive thinking'. I think some of the most hopeless people I have ever met were the brightest and had the most winning smiles, and were the most socially successful - such was their skill in dissimulation.

In particular, hopelessness recruits as its strongest ally - hope. A whole volume could be written on the strange, dialectical relationship between hopelessness and hope. I am not saying that hope is always false, but that hopeless people are often full of hope; they pursue hope; they cling to it, so as not to fall into the abyss of hopelessness. One of the most difficult and painful tasks of the professional helper is to wean people from false hope. There is however real hope - that together we will face this **monster**, and beat it.

I have listened a lot to people who practise positive thinking, positive affirmations, some kind of positive spiritual creed ('God loves me'), and with certain people, I remain unconvinced. To me, they are skating on thin ice. Some people have argued with me that that's all they could do to keep on living, and not fall into the black hole, and I respect that. But can you keep it up your whole life? How will you face death, that other black hole?

From what I have said, it is clear that as well as hopelessness being a terrible debilitating condition, the escape from it can be just as debilitating. It's my belief that **the only liberation** from hopelessness is the experience of

it, the conscious recognition of it as an element in one's psyche, and the conscious struggle to confront it. This is easier said than done! To start with, all this requires quite a degree of ego-strength. If you are not strong enough yet to face your own hopelessness without being swamped, then you certainly shouldn't start! And neither should the helper or therapist be irresponsible enough to try to accelerate this process. What is needéd here is a process of building up your inner strength until you are strong enough.

And then, the first battle is not with the hopelessness itself, but with all the ways of avoiding it that you have built up during your life. You may have become very successful at not being hopeless, or not showing it, and now you are being asked to reverse this, and to begin to surrender to it. This is in itself a long and arduous process. Fortunately, what is asking you to do it is your own unconscious, which actually yearns to be free and to be harmonious and not so dominated by hopelessness.

The true horror of hopelessness is that **it is hopeless**. To feel hopeless is to feel unredeemable, unlovable, unforgivable. It is, simply, unbearable. Thus misery and depression are dull echoes of it, because in its pure state it is sheer agony. How can we ask anyone to go into that hell? First of all, we can't unless we are sure **they** are asking to go there so that they may be finally absolved of this terrible curse. Secondly, we can only go with them if we have been there ourselves.

Every man or woman must have a guide or companion to go into the hell of hopelessness - this truth is found in all mythologies and religions.

Paradoxically, hopelessness is unbearable, but if we go into it, we get through it. There is another side, beyond hopelessness, where there is life again and true hope and happiness. But again, it is vital to have a guide or companion of some kind, otherwise it is too easy to get lost in the labyrinth of our own dark fears and hopes and self-deceits. Surely many suicides are not admissions of hopelessness, but the refusal or inability to be truly hopeless and share this with another. If you let me see your hopelessness, let me be with you while you are in it, then I can remain in the land of the living while you go on your voyage into the land of the dead: I will remain here as your contact with this world, and your point of re-entry into it.

The worst thing is to underestimate hopelessness. It is truly terrible. It is not of this world. It transports us to a hideous world we can only call the underworld, or hell. Nonetheless, we must travel there if that is our fate.

Feeling the hopelessness, being in it and of it, coming through it, will not totally exorcise it. It will remain part of us, perhaps for ever. Here we have the job of confronting it. This may involve an angry refusal to succumb to it, which could perhaps indicate the use of visualization techniques or work with dream imagery, writing,

drawing - whatever techniques come to hand.

Let me add that hopelessness is a cunning opponent. It will constantly try to tear us away from good situations by convincing us they are hopeless; it will constantly suggest the grass is greener somewhere else: it will weaken us and debilitate us and always have a good reason **not** to do something. It may impel us to violence or destructiveness. It will romanticize people and places and situations.

Thus to confront it requires an equal degree of cunning, strength, an ability to retreat at one point, and attack at another.

Paradoxically, we have to surrender to hopelessness and then learn to fight it. There is no universal recipe for this - each individual has to find out the right strategy for them, hopefully with someone else's help.

Let me summarize how I see the battle against hopelessness. I can schematize it into four stages, but let me stress that these are highly abstract, and may not follow in the same order, nor may they all have the same significance.

First, the original situation that coaxed the hopelessness has to be recognized, laid bare, and emotionally re-experienced.

Secondly, our avoidances of hopelessness must be confronted, e.g. desperate cheerfulness, compulsively helping other (also hopeless) people, being super-intellectual about despair. There are an infinite number of avoidances. Thirdly, going into the despair, when you are strong enough, and have a guide whom you trust to remain with you. This means feeling the unbearableness of the hopelessness. Fourthly learning to take on hopelessness in battle, not letting it dominate learning to de-identify from it so that it is part of you, but not the whole of you. I'm sorry if this does sound too schematic and over-organized. It doesn't work out like that in practice - but it is messy and confused and complex. But I think any formulation is helpful that offers a strategy for dealing with this great demon.

Two final points - don't tackle your own hopelessness without professional help. Secondly, my comments have obviously revealed my own close intimacy with hopelessness, and a long struggle against it. Let me add - ruefully! - that, as well as being my own worst enemy, saboteur and demon, hopelessness has sometimes curiously turned into my guide and teacher of wisdom - truly what is called in the Castaneda books 'a worthy opponent'!