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# Doing hope in hopeless times

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**Dr Trudy Meehan**

Lecturer and researcher,  
RCSI Centre for Positive Psychology  
and Health

[www.rcsi.com/positivepsychology](http://www.rcsi.com/positivepsychology)

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“We are indebted to one another, and the debt is a kind of faith – a beautiful, difficult, strange faith. We believe each other into being”

~

JENNIFER MICHAEL HECHT<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes in my work as a Clinical Psychologist, I will reach the limit of my technical competency. I am unable to find a ‘treatment’ for the suffering that a specific person I am consulting with brings into the room. Yet, I believe in something, I believe in the person. I see their ‘turning up’ and asking for help as a commitment to movement, a belief that things can change, and a desire for something other than what currently is.

Sadly, in my work as a Clinical Psychologist, I will also reach the limit of my capacity for hope. When I have neither technical ability nor hope, I feel that I am in my most vulnerable position as a helper. I feel close to burn-out and feel like a failure. Working during a global pandemic is a sure way to ensure a swift loss of technical options and hope. It is a genuinely daunting time for *every* professional. There is no roadmap. While we wait for technical advances in terms of vaccination or therapies for Covid-19, what can we reasonably do?

I suggest we can and should do “reasonable hope”. Kaethe Weingarten wrote about reasonable hope in 2010<sup>2</sup>. Weingarten is a family therapist who observed that many people feel alienated from ‘hope’ because it is too lofty, idealized, and unrealistic. When one cannot access hope, you will likely categorise yourself as ‘hopeless’. So she started to consider if there was a different space that one could occupy, an area that bridged the chasm between hope and hopelessness, her answer was ‘reasonable hope’.

‘Reasonable hope’ is helpful and perhaps even a vital concept for all of us to hold onto during the time of Covid-19. Reasonable hope is very different from the general ‘hope’ that we are most familiar with.

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### Reasonable hope is a collective activity

We generally consider hope as a noun and assume it is an individual state that exists to one or another degree within people. Weingarten argues that hope is a verb, something we actively do. Reasonable hope is about working and doing in the now, and not about waiting for something to exist inside us. Importantly, it is not just an activity, it is a joint activity. Weingarten states that “I hope because we hope”, she calls for an understanding that we are all in this together. She appeals to a universal collective humanity that we all need to thrive. On an elementary technical level, this beckons us toward a collaborative approach to leadership.

### Reasonable hope makes room for despair but has a growth mindset

We are working in spaces where we don't know the answers, Covid-19 will bring us all to the limits of our professional capacity. We need to allow space for grief, disappointment, and despair. We need to be able to tolerate uncertainty and failure. We will be able to tolerate failure if we have a growth mindset<sup>3</sup>. A growth mindset reminds us that although things are unknown, they are not necessarily unsurmountable. Having a growth mindset helps us understand that we don't know the answer yet.

### Reasonable hope is humble and compassionate

We need to be humble and realistic with ourselves. We cannot stay engaged in our work if we are consistently vulnerable to feeling like a failure and hopeless ourselves. Research in breast cancer patients by Johns Hopkins<sup>4</sup> offers an example of how small actions have a positive impact. Patients who receive information infused with emotional support and compassion report lower levels of anxiety and psychological distress. the compassionate oncologist said, *“I know this is a tough experience to go through and I want you to know that I am here with you. We are here together, and we will go through this together”*. Having an oncologist who emotionally walks the journey with you is helpful. When a patient has a poor prognosis for survival, a doctor is limited in their technical ability to help them. Still, they can reduce the person's anxiety and psychological distress by offering compassion and connection.

Outside of the clinic, this sentiment is still relevant –

In *Leaders Eat Last*, Simon Sinek reminds us of the need to care for our team, *“when a leader embraces their responsibility to care for people instead of caring for numbers, then people will follow, solve problems and see to it that the leader's vision comes to life in the right way, a stable way and not the expedient way”*<sup>5</sup>.

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Leading with compassion happens when we agree to be brave enough to care and bear witness to the challenges our team faces. It's in our ability to sit with them, beside them, through the uncertainty. Our offering care, offers hope because it provides community, compassion, and connection. If no one is alone, then there is room and reason to hope.

### Why is compassion important?

We know that empathy, which is when we feel and understand (but take no action) causes the pain centres of the brain to light up in the person doing the empathy<sup>6</sup>. Conversely, we have learned that compassion, which involves feeling and understanding *and* action, causes reward centres in the brain to light up and positively affect the person doing the compassion<sup>7</sup>. This finding is significant. When we have no options to take action we feel pain, if we do compassion and find a way to act, we will prevail .

Now here's the trick. Often, especially during a global pandemic, we have minimal options for action. We need to redefine what we mean by action. We need to look more humbly at action. Compassion helps us see the value of human connection and caring as valuable action. It reminds us to focus on our people and our values and not on success:

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*“Don't aim at success. The more you aim at it and make it a target, the more you are going to miss it. For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side effect of one's personal dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as the by-product of one's surrender to a person other than oneself”*

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VIKTOR E. FRANKL

(Man's Search for Meaning)

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