

Hope – The Inner Fire

Adapted by Personal Safety Nets® from “Inner Fire, Your Will to Live” by Ernest and Isadora Rosenbaum, Plexus, Austin, Texas 1998



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*Look to this day for it is life,
For yesterday is already a dream,
And tomorrow is only a vision.
But today, well lived, makes every yesterday
A dream of happiness and every tomorrow, a vision of hope.
- Sanskrit Proverb*

When we look at patients living with an illness or through a serious life change their anxiety about the future is familiar to all of us, but so are their efforts to seek knowledge and to gain control over their lives.

In taking control individuals accept responsibility for their physical and emotional well-being. They come to see that the way in which they portray their actions to others determines how friends, family, and colleagues react to them. This awareness of their own attitude and its importance is often a *wake-up call* leading them to assess their values and to either confirm or change their way of life. For those who nurtured old relationships and developed new ones, each lived life more fully while learning to live with illness. Each of them found hope.

The same opportunity to acknowledge mortality and examine priorities is available to all: both the currently healthy and those with illness. Start by asking, how do I want to live the rest of my life? If you discover behaviors or habits you wish to change, you are free to begin experimenting in that direction. You may start to take risks, open your mind to other modes of thought, take a trip or a class, and make new friends. Anyone who goes through this process will undergo permanent, positive change and will have begun to nurture the will to live.

Although there's no precise definition of the will to live, the following attitudes and behaviors common to patients observed over many years of practice have been identified:

- They live in the present. They know the past cannot be changed, but they also know they have the capacity to influence the quality of today and tomorrow.
- They accept their new problems and attempt to solve them through introspection, understanding, and sharing.
- They set reasonable, achievable goals.
- They consciously try to downplay negative emotions and to focus on feelings of love and hope.
- They surround themselves with supportive friends and family members.
- They actively search for ways to help others.

As care givers, consider the first five attitudes and behaviors to be essential. Those who practice them are taking responsibility for their illness and ensuring that their needs are met. The sixth represents a principle long recognized as vital to a fulfilling life: Try every day to help someone else! When your own needs are met, you are emotionally free to give to others. You too can reach out, relieve loneliness and give hope.

Of all the ingredients of the will to live, none is more essential than hope. But hope is relative: One person may hope for the fullest possible remaining life; another may hope to live until a special holiday or a family reunion; still another may simply hope to avoid suffering (and believe this is possible.)

Hope may indeed be one of the elements that enables a person to live longer than medically anticipated. However, the opposite is also true. An extreme lack of hope can have the same effect as the phenomenon called *self-willed* death or bone pointing, observed among Australian Aborigines and in other South Pacific cultures. In such cases, a tribal witch doctor casts a spell similar to that observed in Voodoo (in certain African or South American tribes), causing the victim to suffer paralyzing fear, withdraw from society, and die within a short time. Of course, the witch doctor can only be effective if the potential victim believes in the power of the curse. In the same way, a person with an illness can be adversely affected when doctors and nurses project a sense of hopelessness, or when family and friends are unable to hide their fears; just as they can be hope-filled when the medical team's focus is positive and supportive.

Clearly, realistic hope is a life force in and of itself. If you are dealing with a serious illness, you may often feel exhausted, overwhelmed by never-ending problems, ready to give up. Yet, a little hope for a remote chance for survival or a small improvement in your condition can give you the strength to carry on.

*There is no medicine like hope
No incentive so great
And no tonic so powerful as the
expectation of something better tomorrow.*
- Orison Swett Marden

In conclusion, the will to live both defies definition and has many definitions. We can only describe common behaviors and attitudes among those who have it, and acknowledge its wondrous power. People who exhibit a strong will to live appear to have strong bonds of friendship and love. They also show a determination to meet misfortune head on to accept what has happened and find a way to cope. Most important, perhaps as a result of the foregoing, people with the will to live are determined to live life to the fullest, be this for one week or a natural life span.