Mindfulness and Hope Are Unrelated. Researchers Say That’s the Point

7 MIN READ

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BY LAUREN GRAY

One calms your nervous system. The other drives your sense of agency. A new study confirms they work independently.

Here’s a tension most of us feel but rarely name: we know we’re supposed to live in the moment, and we also know that having something to look forward to makes the moment more worth living. Mindfulness and hope, present and future, surrender and striving, are concepts that can seem at odds. But a **new study** suggests that embracing that tension, rather than resolving it, may be one of the better secrets to a long and flourishing life.

The study, published in April by researchers at Santa Clara University, explored the relationship between mindfulness, the practice of present-moment awareness, and hope, defined here as belief in your ability to set goals and find ways to reach them. The findings confirm that the two are not in conflict, nor so similar as to serve the same purpose.

Together, mindfulness and hope can make your life tangibly better.

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Hope And Mindfulness Are Embodied Forms of Wellbeing

Dr. Shauna Shapiro, PhD, a **clinical psychologist**, mindfulness expert, and a lead author on the study, understands why people sometimes view mindfulness and hope as existing in conflict.

“Mindfulness is often understood as being fully present with what is, while hope is often understood as orienting toward the future. So people sometimes assume mindfulness means accepting the present moment exactly as it is, whereas hope means wanting something different in the future,” she tells Super Age. “In that framing, they can seem almost opposite: one rooted in the present moment, the other in the future.”

However, the study suggests the relationship between mindfulness and hope is much more nuanced, and that neither one rules the other out.

The researchers surveyed 145 undergraduates using a battery of trait and well-being measures, including **depression**, anxiety, stress, life satisfaction, sense of control, and mental sharpness. They ultimately found that mindfulness and hope were independently linked to wellbeing, but essentially unrelated to each other (statistically speaking, nearly zero correlation) as they mapped those specific measures.

In other words, you can have a lot of one and very little of the other, or you can cultivate both side by side. Being deeply present in your daily life doesn’t make you less hopeful, and holding strong hopes for your future doesn’t pull you out of the now. They’re separate strengths, and ideally you’re building up both to reap a wider range of benefits.

The Difference Between Hope and Mindfulness

Mindfulness and hope each have unique benefits, according to the new study.

- **Mindfulness,** “defined as the awareness that arises through intentionally paying attention with kindness and curiosity,” is distinctly associated with lower anxiety and better impulse control, resulting in a calmer nervous system and more even-keeled decision

making.

- **Hope,** conceptualized in the study as a belief in one's ability to set goals and reach them, is uniquely tied to life satisfaction and a positive sense of agency. Research has long connected hope to resilience in the face of setbacks, and this study adds weight to the idea that continuing to set meaningful goals, however modest, is a genuine ingredient in psychological well-being at any age.

"Hope without mindfulness can become fantasy or denial," explains Dr. Shapiro. "Mindfulness without hope can sometimes become passive or disconnected from our natural capacity for growth and meaningful action," she continues.

"Mindful Hope" Is a Powerful Well-Being Framework

The researchers offer a concept worth sitting with: mindful hope. They define it as a balanced state in which "present-focused awareness supports constructive, future-oriented thinking."

Rather than choosing between living in the moment and working toward something better, mindful hope asks us to do both simultaneously. One anchors you; the other propels you.

"It is the ability to be grounded in the present moment while also remaining open to possibility," Dr. Shapiro says. "It is not denial, fantasy, or bypassing pain. It is a clear-eyed way of meeting reality as it is, while also remembering that change, healing, and growth are possible. Together, they offer a powerful path: we can be fully present with life as it is, while remaining open to all that is possible," she adds.

The Three Roadblocks to Mindful Hope

Dr. Shapiro says there are some common roadblocks that can stand in the way of cultivating mindful hope.

1. Confusing Hope with Fantasy

“One roadblock is confusing hope with fantasy. People often think hope means believing that everything will turn out the way they want. But mindful hope allows for uncertainty and infinite possibility. It involves humility and surrender, combined with the clear seeing and wisdom needed to take action where we can,” she says.

However, she’s also careful to note that surrender and acceptance are not synonymous with passive resignation. “It means seeing clearly so we can respond wisely. Hope helps us orient toward possibility and meaningful action,” Dr. Shapiro notes.

2. Defaulting to Fear

Another roadblock is fear, the study author says. “When we have been disappointed or hurt, it can feel safer not to hope. Mindful hope allows us to courageously face our fears while keeping the door to transformation open.”

To help clients replace their reactive fear with hope, Audrey Jaynes, LCSW, an **NYU-trained therapist**, draws on two frameworks in her practice: mindfulness-based **cognitive behavioral therapy** (CBT) and acceptance commitment therapy (ACT).

“I think you can choose hope the same way that you can choose fear,” she tells Super Age. “Mindfulness gives you the awareness and space to make that choice.”

In practice, that means learning to detach from automatic negative thoughts rather than being ruled by them. CBT does this by encouraging people to investigate irrational thoughts and replace them with more accurate ones. ACT goes a step further with a technique called cognitive diffusion, creating enough mental distance from a

thought that it loses its grip, passing through rather than taking hold.

3. Forcing Toxic Positivity

Both experts note that forced positivity can be another pitfall here. The goal isn't to manufacture optimism, it's to clear a productive, healthy path for anxiety, fear, and shame to move through. And when that path opens up, hope tends to follow naturally, Jaynes says.

"Just like a fearful thought, a hopeful thought is a prediction," the therapist notes. "Neither I nor the client know if it will be the actual outcome."

By challenging our automatic thoughts, the result is almost always hope, she adds: "You can choose a belief in yourself, your goals, and your future not because it's the objective truth, but because it feels good or it serves you to do so. Ultimately it's your decision."

Dr. Shapiro agrees that mindful hope is cultivated "not by forcing toxic positivity, but by training ourselves to stay present and open, even in uncertainty."

Build Your Own Mindful Hope Practice

This combination of mindfulness and hope may be something you're already doing without naming. But when we name it, it becomes a repeatable practice, something you can cultivate and actively return to when the future feels uncertain, or when the present feels too heavy to sit with.

A Daily Mindful Hope Practice

We asked Dr. Shapiro to share her own daily mindful hope practice. It takes just moments to try.

"The first step is to pause and come into the present moment. Feel your feet on the

ground, soften the body, and take a few conscious breaths. Mindful hope begins with honestly acknowledging what is true here and now. We do not need to pretend things are better than they are. We begin by naming what is real: ‘This hurts,’ ‘I feel afraid,’ ‘I don’t know what will happen.’”

From that grounded place, the next step is to gently widen the lens by asking what else is true. “Maybe there is support available. Maybe there is one small action I can take. Maybe I have survived difficult things before. Maybe this moment is temporary, and not the whole story.”

Her simple practice is:

Pause.
Breathe.
Name what is true.
Offer yourself kindness.
Ask, “What is one wise or compassionate step I can take?”

Grounding Hope in The Present

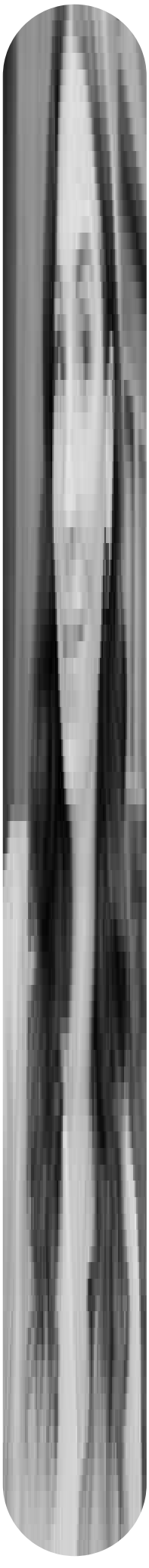
As Dr. Shapiro and Jaynes both suggest, combining mindfulness techniques with hope-building exercises in therapeutic settings could be an even more powerful approach. But even if you start small, the message is encouraging: two qualities that have likely sustained you through a long life are doing more good than you may have realized. Cultivating them with intention could do even more.

“I would add that mindful hope feels especially important right now,” adds Dr. Shapiro. “Many people are carrying uncertainty, grief, anxiety, and exhaustion. Mindful hope does not ask us to look away from suffering. It asks us to meet suffering with courage, compassion, and presence, while also remembering that the future is not fixed. We can be rooted in this moment, exactly as it is, and still remain open to healing, transformation, and infinite possibility.”

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WRITTEN BY:



Lauren Gray

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