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Psychology of forgiveness and recovery from depression: Diagnosing the *hopeless* and *hapless* fictional women

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ABSTRACT

Though a literary study, this paper aims at investigating how hope and depression, two binary ends of psycho-physical condition, can be bridged up by forgiveness acting as an intermediate. Hope and goal can meet together only with the proper intermediation and association of agency thinking and pathway thinking. Non-achievement of goal and consequent loss of hope are triggered by the absence of such association that often results from the negative impact of some unwelcome event or injustice. Thus, hope is often challenged by the external (or even internal) forces that hurt. The cumulative outcome is despair and depression. But forgiveness is a weapon that can free us from all the negative forces (that a wrong deed exerts), and can empower one to fight despair and remediate depressive symptoms. The primary objective of the study is to apply the psychological theory of hope to the analysis of the select women's depression and role of forgiveness in fighting against it and in restoring hope/faith in life. The analysis of the cases of the modern fictional women like Meena or Mrs. Thurlow has revealed this. On the other hand, in Mrs. Das or Rosie, the relationship between basic hope and final happy outcome remains unbridgeable due to the absence of sincere act of forgiveness. The stronger the hope,

the more powerful the chances of exoneration of the self through forgiveness, the more reasons for celebration of life, the more freed from the negative impacts of the offenders.

Keywords: *Agency, pathways, basic hope, depression, modern narratives*

FULL PAPER

The article is based on an attempt to find the literary testimonies to the well-established psycho-analytical theory of hope and depression. Hope is “the expectation that one will have positive experiences or that a potentially threatening or negative situation will not materialize or will ultimately result in a favorable state of affairs,” as per the definition offered by the American Psychological Association. As a positive psychological construct, hope has two subcomponents: agency (that helps pursue the goal) and pathway (the way to achieve the goal) that working together can lead to the final goal. It's presented below:

Hope → [agency ↔ pathway] → Goal

↓

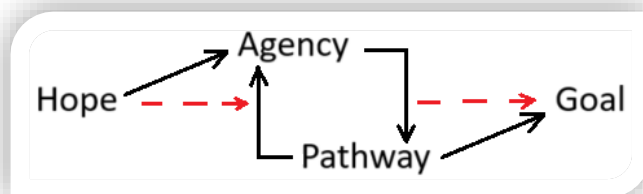


Figure 1: Schema of Hope Theory (Snyder 1994a) ¹

Hope is, in the words of Snyder “the perceived capability to derive pathways to desired goals, and motivate oneself via agency thinking to use those pathways.” (Snyder 2002: 249). This definition makes it obvious that agency thinking and pathway thinking are closely integrated into hope. Thus, hope-to-goal journey can be undertaken only via ‘agency’ thinking² and ‘pathway’ thinking³ (Snyder 1994a). The study has concentrated on hope (for recovery) of select women and the final outcome with reference to some wrong done to them. Unsuccessful attempt at this recovery means to lose the goal that can lead to depression or emotional break-down. But successful recovery attempt leads to positive outcomes with the attainment of goal through a perfect association and interaction between agency and pathways.

The gap between hope and the goal is natural and inevitable. Only with the successful pursuit of the goal, two ends meet. Pursuit must be supported by both body and

mind— first, psychological properties of motivation and belief are needed, then energy (physical as well as mental) is also needed. This motivation to pursue goals endorsed by energy and belief in one's capacity to achieve desired goals is called agency (Snyder, 2002, Snyder *et al.*, 2002). At the final step to achieve the goal, some definite means or the road-map must be there, and this is called pathway. Pathway thinking is the development of routes to goal achievement. In this study the select women couldn't achieve their final goals (that means their basic hopes couldn't be fulfilled). After their hope breaks down, they have either plunged into depression or have recovered from this. The primary questions addressed in this study are:

- i) Why do their hopes fail? Is there any dissociation between agency thinking and pathway thinking, or did their hope fail owing to some other reason?
- ii) How could the women handle their possible depression? What role does 'forgiveness' play in their journey to recovery?

Hope itself (irrespective of the expected performances of the agency and pathway) can have strong psycho-physical offshoots. Strong hope can help people fight odds like illnesses, trauma, stress etc. and can improve daily functioning (Hart *et al.* 2008, Gallagher *et al.* 2020). The road leading one from hope to happiness, there are agency (i.e. some motivating factor that supports hope) and pathway (the means/way to convert hope into a substantive reality). Loss of hope (the negative counterpart of hope) nullifies the whole journey toward the goal, and consequently invalidates the potentials/utilities of agency and pathway.

In fact, both hope and loss of hope have their psychological effects—one can lead to happiness and sense of fulfillment (provided the presence of proper agency and pathway), the other to depression and some other complicated psycho-physical symptoms as well (when both agency and pathway are somehow nullified). The present study is confined to examining the process as to how initial hope is frustrated (by some offense, done by the self or the other) taking the offended toward depression, and how depression is overcome by the more resilient victims. Resilience and positive approach can result in a forgiving mind. In our study, the primary objective is to find out if these psychological extremes can be bridged up by the intervention of forgiveness, the potential intermediate.

In spite of some close association, 'hope' can never be equated with 'wish'⁴ or 'optimism'⁵ (Snyder 1994b). Hope, forgiveness, and happiness are the direct correlates—forgiveness retains the basic hope and ensures happiness in life. Making selection of fictional women characters created by the modern story-tellers (namely Jhumpa Lahiri's Mrs. Das, Narayan's Rosie, Sunita Jain's Meena and Bates' Mrs. Thurlow), this paper intends to investigate the basic hope and depression, two binary ends of psycho-physical condition. When hope finds corresponding agency as its motivator and pathway, it brings one to fulfillment of hope and consequent happiness. But our select women never achieve this goal, rather come very close to depression resulting from nullification of hope. In analyzing the individual cases of these women,

the study applies the theoretical model of psychoanalysis to the exploration of their hope as well as the role of forgiveness functioning as a remediating agent to overpower and alleviate depression.

The cases of our select women conform to the scientific theory that, there is an unfailing interplay among basic hope, depression, and forgiveness. Forgiveness is inversely correlated with depression: the stronger the element of forgiveness, the surer the alleviation of depression. Hope needs to have an associate agency as a support in fulfilling the hope. But sometimes one's hope may be challenged by an external (or even internal) factor or a wrong deed with its negative forces. Such forces hurt the person, fail him/her in search for the positive associate agency and block all pathways. It may lead to frustration, despair and depression finally. It is a vile racket of the negatives that frustrates even the person's desire/will power to look for a remedy. In this challenging situation, only forgiveness can be the sole weapon that can free him/her from all the negative forces. A forgiving approach can empower the person to fight despair and remediate depressive symptoms. Once forgiveness in action, he/she comes out of the vile tangle to retain and reinforce the basic hope in life with a renewed vigour.

The term 'forgiveness' can be interpreted differently, depending on the context—for example, in behavioural science it means something different from its moral or religious sense. However, 'forgiveness' may refer, in a more general sense, to one's voluntary decision to let go the inner grudge, anger or unhappiness with anything/anybody. Relating the element of forgiveness to our four select women in this study, the following sections would exhibit how forgiveness with all its benevolent impacts on one's psychological state can be a gateway to happiness.

Now, as the first subject of our study, let us have a look at the case of Mrs. Das in Jhumpa Lahiri's short story "The Interpreter of Maladies." She was a housewife of Indian origin living in America. The story tells us that, in a moment of passionate impulsiveness she happened to commit adultery, eventually plunged into remorse, and pathetically got into a fit of depression. But significantly everything—the adultery and the depressive outburst—happened at the back of her husband.

Basic Hope:

The basic hope of Mrs. Das is that she would have complete recovery from her sense of guilt (if not full absolution for her sins granted), and the fractured relationship with Raj her husband will be repaired.

Agency thinking:

Since the commitment of her adultery, Mrs. Das could gather neither any sense of determination nor confidence to get absolved through confession to her husband. Her sense of guilt got inwardly the fullest control over herself, and made her incapable of any honest confession. In this way, for her the agency thinking index was extremely low, turning the pathway thinking almost irrelevant to the final goal pursuit measurement.

Pathway thinking:

Due to the absolute lowness of her agency thinking in this case, pathway thinking must have ebbed the lowest. Consequently, these two dimensions being very low are closely associated with a high degree of depression.

Goal and the Final outcome:

Due to the weak association between basic hope and agency thinking, as well as the absence of any concrete pathway, the final goal remained unattained as a natural outcome.

Mrs. Das voluntarily exercised infidelity. As an unguarded young woman, she may be called a victim of over-credulousness goading her to fall a prey to the deception of the anonymous Punjabi friend. But more importantly, she strictly adhered to the notions of conjugal fidelity and love. Hence a clash between her conventional values and wrong-doing. Not only she lost her chastity to the Punjabi friend on the sofa, she bore his baby, Bobby. Bobby is symbolically to represent the mark of the damage done to her cultural and moral integrity owing to her diasporic shift. As a sort of punishment, she has to bury her guilty consciousness in the dark chasm of deception and hypocrisy.

With the loss of sexual chastity, Mrs. Das seemed to have started understanding the true worth and significance of love and marriage. Though she is now living in the USA and thereby somewhat detached from the native culture and society, her inheritance of Indian value system has been shown running through her veins as evident in Lahiri's well-designed references to her upbringing and education. Mrs. Das went to the core of a different culture where liberal sexual behaviour is attested, she had to pay the price and suffer. Mrs. Das was caught in the web of cultural disparities, one being too rigid in sexual morality, other liberal and progressive in terms of love, marriage, and sex.

Like Mrs. Das, Rosie in R.K. Narayan's novel "The Guide" also committed adultery, though with greater amount of volition as her own choice. But importantly enough, Rosie could avert depressive symptoms effectively even though she lost her goal due to the dissociation between the agency thinking and pathway thinking.

Rosie, the daughter of a *devdasi*, in R.K. Narayan's *Guide* had a miserable experience of marriage with Marco, and got into an adulterous relationship with Raju the tour guide. Marco the husband represents a kind of duality, physically impotent and unproductive but intellectually enriched and fertile. Caught between the extremes, Rosie ran after an apparent impossibility—the combination of potent body (of Raju) and a fertile intellect and talent of a scholar (Marco the researcher in archaeology).

Basic Hope: Though Rosie committed adultery, apparently, she didn't plunge into remorse and depression like Mrs. Das. She hopes to be a womanist, if not a feminist.

Agency thinking

She hardly suffered from any sense of guilt that could have got control over herself. She did bother neither to hide facts from her husband nor confessed in bare terms,

even when she decided to go back to Marco. As a modern woman she hope to exercise her feministic rights to her body in building up relationships. She was decisive, confident enough to dictate terms. Her confident act of decision-making is the agency through which she can achieve what she wants. She had Raju when she needed him, and the same with the husband. Her confidence, a product of her modernistic education. That's why, she never hesitated to say, "After all, after all, he is my husband."

Pathway thinking:

Her agency thinking index was extremely high, thereby making the pathway thinking almost inevitable and a warranty for a positive dimension of final goal pursuit measurement. These two dimensions being very strong can ensure no possibility of any depression.

Goal and the Final outcome:

The final outcome is that Rosie stoutly and confidently fought against the possibilities of depression with her strong agency and pathway thinking.

Rosie is like an enchantress to ensnare Raju in her bewitching web. Though not a mythological seductress consciously, she creates for Raju all the illusions in which Raju is steeped. True that Rosie encouraged Raju in certain ways, but it's more than mere seduction; it's a frank confession of a love-deprived woman in a constant search desperately for some warmth of company Marco to her could never offer. Raju-Rosie love went against all societal oppositions, putting a huge stigma on Rosie than on Raju, as it happens always when patriarchy is at work. Psychologically Raju could find some fulfilment in his professionally handled love (or lustfulness) for Rosie, as it gives him the opportunity to fill some gap in her life. This is a peculiar instinct in Raju that he finds some narcissistic pleasure in acting for the others' sake, not listening to his own heart even. It gave him a solid satisfaction for the time being while being acted upon by other people's desires. Though apparently Raju seems to be much active in running the affair, he is more passive in that he never definitely took a decision or did anything, rather allowed things to happen according to others' desires. From the woman's point of view, the question is why Rosie allowed Raju to have sex with her. The main motivation was not lust, but something described by Raju: "*I knew I had placed her in my debt.*" The debt is for his giving her the attention and care she needs, and she has to redeem it. One shouldn't miss the voice of a narcissist here more than that of a true lover. As long as Rosie needed Raju for her profession career as dancer, Raju was used and manipulated by Nalini.

Initially Raju offered all the physical stimulation to satisfy Rosie's needs, but still their relationship soon proved miserably incompatible because he was quite incapable of providing Rosie with the much-needed creative stimulation. His bluffs formed the loose string for their relationship to survive. He couldn't live up to the Rosie's ideal of love expressed in the Tamil song, '*Lover means always God.*' Raju with all his intellectual barrenness could just be a hypocritical connoisseur of Rosie's art; art for him a commercial product, a means to make money out of it. While Raju couldn't be

productive by any means, Marco finally came to symbolize a high peak of intellectual productivity. It would be an oversimplification to say that she accepted the traditional norms of society through her return. But had Marco not been her husband all through and society in its own place with the everlasting demand, *'Fit in, Oh, Belong?'*

Coming to Meena, a middle-aged victim of unsuccessful marriage in Sunita Jain's short story "Heavy is Gold," we would discuss what kind of association was there between the agency thinking and pathway thinking and how she overcame depression finally.

Meena is the central protagonist in the story. She was a beautiful college girl when marriage was thrust upon her. In the family where the father died very early, Meena took so many responsibilities. She was confronted with the gender discrimination in the family, but it could not prevent her from behaving sensibly toward the family members. Instinctively she tried to protect her mother from the furious assault of her elder brother Rajiv, or took care of the studies of her sister Priti, or taught love and mercy for the living creatures to Dipak as a baby. Her submission to the marriage decision of elders without any words was a part of her sense of responsibility. She was a caring daughter who protected her, offered tea when the other exhausted, never complained to her. Meena was an obedient sister who followed Rajiv in his mischief as a child, never disrespected him even when he hurt their mother. She was a loving, affectionate sister to Priti and Deepak.

Meena was an introvert, who could feel but not express it, or rather doesn't want to express it if it hurt others. Her inner thoughts (put in the text in italics) are more expressive than her words. She was much intelligent and tactful. To the question about her husband's absence at the wedding party, she replied differently to Sudhir and to her mother. To Sudhir, a guest at the party, she replied that Giri hated travel and there was none to look after the household at Nasibabad, but to her mother she referred to his health problem as a deterrent. Meena represents those unfortunate middle class girls who become the victims of dowry system, the system of marriage where money makes the grooms more eligible than what education, talents or love can, where financial security is believed to make up for any other drawbacks.

Basic Hope:

All through Meena cherished her basic hope to be a good wife, if not a happy and successful wife, and to see all around her happy.

Agency thinking

The agency thinking for Meena was always of a wavering nature, since some element of self-abnegation keeps working in her character.

Pathway thinking:

Due to the fallible nature of Rosie's agency thinking, pathway thinking must be very tentative, irresolute, and inconsistent. It runs the risk of putting the patient into frequent fits of depression alongside her apparent resolute demeanour. The irony is

that the society and her family people persuaded her to put every bit of pathway thinking of her affluent husband her jewellery and material comforts that money can bring, but she found these as a mockery of pathways being non-existent.

Goal and the Final outcome:

Because of the two-fold dimensions of weak agency and pathway, Meena kept being immersed into deepest form of depression never drawing attention of others.

As our last literary subject of study, let us now investigate the case of Mrs. Thurlow, a selfless mother in H.E. Bates' "The Ox," and examine how it was possible for her to overcome depression in spite of a very weak association (and almost no interaction) between agency thinking and pathway thinking.

Basic Hope:

Being a hard-working poor woman, the basic hope of Mrs. Thurlow centres round her two sons—one nine and the other thirteen—and their future. She expects that in future her sons would be well established in their lives. "She saw them realizing refined ambitions, making their way as assistants in shops, as clerks in offices, even as butlers" (Bates 1968: 90). This hope is so humble of her, but more than what she has been able to achieve.

Agency thinking:

The basic hope that her sons have a better life motivates and gives purpose to her life of endless drudgery. Mrs. Thurlow had strong belief that her consistent hard-work, strong determination and resolution must make her dream come true. The rare coordination between her thoughts and work reflects the degree of her persistence, determination and desperation:

"Her thoughts, like her work, went always along the same lines, towards the future, out into the resplendent avenues of ambitions, always for the two sons. There was a division in herself, the one part stolid and uncomplaining in perpetual labour, the other fretful and almost desperate in an anxiety to establish a world beyond her own." (Bates 1968: 91).

Thus, all her thoughts are focused on her hopes for the boys; and they kept supplying to her motivation and energy for all the toils.

Pathway thinking:

Regarding Mrs. Thurlow's pathway thinking, the major problem came out of her intellectual stagnation and barrenness, all symptomatic of an ox. Her one and only pathway was money, to hoard money for the boys' future. She was saving her hard-earned money as much as she can, as she believes, money can make future brighter for her sons: "She had saved money for them. For fifteen years she had hoarded the scrubbing-and-washing money," (Bates 1968: 90). But she could hardly understand that, as her basic hope centred around other people, namely here sons, they couldn't be taken for granted. Neither could she have a very rational or practical monetary plan:

“She had saved fifty-four pounds. She would make it a hundred. How it was to be done she could not think....She trusted in some obscure providential power as tireless and indomitable as herself” (Bates 1968: 91).

nor could she take her sons (who are the pivot of the plan) into confidence regarding the goal and its achievement. So, Mrs. Thurlow’s agency thinking was never complemented with a sound pathway thinking. She had signs of a goal-oriented mindset but never developing proper strategies to achieve goals, and not having much belief in her own ability to make change. She had never established the goal based on practical considerations or on previous knowledge/performances.

Mrs. Thurlow’s pathway thinking, however weak from the very beginning, got fully spoiled with loss of money, of her sons and husband. The hard-earned money was stolen, spent away by her husband who subsequently got into a silent insanity and sentenced to death. Her children forsook her and preferred to stay with their uncle who can afford better amenities and comfort to them, and they will have better chances in life. Being faced with her failures, he accepted her destiny coolly: “It seemed to her suddenly that the house, outlined darkly above the dark hill, was a long way off. She had for one moment an impression that she would never reach it” Losing everything she was living for, she found herself to be identified with the deflated tyre: “The wheels of the bicycle seemed as if they would not turn, and she could hear the noise of the air dying once again in the tyre”

However, Mrs. Thurlow never complained against injustices done to her, i.e. her sons’ selfishness, her husband’s indifference and disloyalty or her brother’s lack of empathy. Forgiveness was innate with her. She overcame any possible depressive symptoms with an unmatched degree of self-control and natural power to undermine any destructive emotion.

Goal and the Final outcome:

The final goal got partially/marginally fulfilled but in an alternative way.

Thorough analysis makes it evident that, either of Mrs. Das or Rosie silently developed her innermost resentment with herself, her own liberal sexual behaviour, no matter it resulted from the over-domineering passionate impulse of the moment or a deliberate choice. On the other hand, Meena or Mrs. Thurlow had her grudge over her near and dear ones, developed in similar silence with a snowball effect. Now an interesting point to consider is these women’s individual ways of addressing their innermost grudge or unhappiness. The acts that led first two women to depression were committed by themselves, whereas, for the other two women, the reasons behind depression were rooted elsewhere (outside their self). The question of forgiveness becomes intricate here, as Mrs. Das or Rosie had themselves to forgive, but Meena or Mrs. Thurlow could forgive others (it is her mother and her husband Giri) for Meena, and for Mrs Thurlow her husband, carpenter brother and children). In the pre-forgiveness period, the offense—no matter committed by whom—and its impact kept gripping the mind of the offended. If the hurt stayed with the offended for a prolonged period of time, it can lead to some state of delirium (as seen in case of Mrs. Thurlow) or utmost form

of depression (as it happened in case of Mrs. Das). When the offense is forgiven, it can ease up the grip eventually, no matter the process is a slow and steady one (in case of Meena) or instant (in case of Rosie). No forgiveness is, in a sense, to allow the offense and offender to have a great control over the offended and his/her prospect of happiness. On the contrary, working on forgiveness starts lessening the grip of the offense. In case of Risoe, the act of forgiving has even led her to a better understanding of both her husband and Raju, compassion, and empathy for the scholar of archaeology Marco.

Happiness starts gradually marching forward to the offended, provided it is forgiveness in the true sense of the term. Act of forgiveness is never to be taken synonymous with the act of forgetting or excusing the one that hurt the offended. Forgetting or excuse is nothing more than putting the problem under the carpet for the time being. As it is just a kind of super-imposed make-up with the wrong or the wrong-doer, it cannot bring true happiness to the offended with any consistency and permanence. On the contrary, forgiveness is never simply an instance of truce but a victory itself promising peace and equilibrium, this sense of peace allows one to focus on his/her own self and helps to go on with life.

In fine, it can be said that the cases of Meena or Mrs. Thurlow bear evidence to the fact that forgiveness has power to remediate the wrong. On the other hand, owing to the absence of sincere act of forgiveness, Mrs. Das or Rosie found the relationship between basic hope and final happy outcome remaining unbridgeable. The stronger the hope, the more powerful the chances of exoneration of the self through forgiveness, the more freed from the negative impacts of the offenders, the more reasons for celebration of life.

All these women went through a number of negative experiences. Mrs. Das kept being crushed under the sense of guilt every single day; Mrs. Thurlow faced the callousness of her husband and betrayal of her children, breach of trust by her brother; Rosie felt deceived by Raju or Meena kept hankering after for love, compassion and understanding. Hope equipped them well for the battle. It was just like a buffer to protect them from negativities, to keep them going without complaint, without being outspokenly rebellious. It was only hope that helped them adapt and face challenges (Flett *et al.* 2011), even when their so-called 'peaceful' life was disrupted by the negative forces, the offenses.

As already mentioned above, our selection of the fictional characters is motivated by the distinction between the roots of the negative force (i.e. the wrong deed) that endangers hope: the force working from outside (cases of Mrs. Thurlow and Meena) or from within (cases of Mrs. Das and Rosie). For Mrs. Thurlow, hope is simply the mindset that promoted her unmatched resilience in the face of any sort of difficulty. Even though she couldn't find her pathways to fulfil hope, her initial hopes that eventually got petrified into stoicism, and helped her overcome depression. The resilience shown by Meena helped her keep going despite her loveless lonely life, her loss of all hopes that brought her on to the verge of depression. In their fight against hopelessness, while Mrs. Thulow's forte is stoical attitude to life, Meena's forte is her

family values and a strong sense of relationships and responsibilities. By virtue of this, they could forgive all around who were responsible for injustices against them and thereby avert depression. Mrs. Das and Rosie committed adultery themselves that substantially makes the prospect of their happiness plummet. They might have hoped to overcome the burden of sin to keep going on with their conjugal relationship.

However, Mrs. Das' hopes shattered soon, though not Rosie's. When Rosie could retain some of her hope and avert the direst form of depression by the agency of her modern feminist approach to life and sense of independence, Mrs. Das was fully overtaken by her sense of guilt and depression. Interestingly these four wives represent a contrast by representing the binary oppositions of fidelity and licentiousness. While their licentious acts made the soul impure and incapable of forgiving themselves, strict adherence to and respect for the values and conjugal ties strengthened Mrs. Thurlow and Meena (encouraged the element of forgiveness) and helped them find the proper agencies in their fight against depression.

The close studies of these four fictional characters assert that negative dimensions of agency thinking and pathways thinking are consistently associated with depression, but agency thinking is more pivotal, as Corrigan and Schutte (2023) proved in their study. In case of Meena and Mrs. Das it is evident that when the agency thinking has a very low index, it can never be recovered overnight at the level of pathway thinking. That is why, Crane (2014) commented that agency thinking is the most reliable predictor of goal pursuit outcomes, and challenged the possibility of the role of pathway thinking turning additive all on a sudden, as indicated by Snyder (2002). Our studies also confirm that only those people can overcome depressive symptoms whose agency thinking index is very strong and high, e.g. Mrs. Thurlow and Rosie, whereas owing to their weak pathway index Meena and Mrs. Das got dipped in fits of depression.

Word Notes:

1. According to Snyder's Hope theory, agency and pathways thinking are both necessary and additive components of hopeful thinking. When a goal is pursued, pathways thinking and agency thinking mutually support each other.
 2. Agency thinking: The motivational component of hope, which involves the ability to use self-referential thoughts to produce the confidence and energy needed to reach goals.
 3. Pathways thinking: The ability to generate routes to achieve goals, while feeling confident that the chosen path will lead to success.
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4. To hope' is never the same as 'to wish.' Wishing is passive toward a goal, and hope is about acting toward it. Furthermore, there can be some negative wish, but hope is always positive.
5. Hope and optimism are also not synonymous. Optimism is the outlook that good things must take place fulfilling wishes and desires. Unlike optimism, which is simply the expectation of a better future, hope is both goal-oriented and action-oriented. Hope One can be taught to 'hope,' but to be optimistic is an innate philosophical bent.

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