

THE BREAD & WATER OF HOPE

Hope and help are available in every desert of despair.

By Marissa Widdison
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If you had to describe how “hope” feels to you, what would you say? Is it warm like sunshine? Does it bubble with excitement? Maybe it feels like a safety net underneath you if something goes wrong.

Have you ever felt opposite feelings—those of hopelessness? If so, you are not alone. Even prophets have struggled with feelings like those. For example, the scriptures describe the prophet Elijah fleeing for his life. Running into the desert, he took shelter under a juniper tree and begged the Lord to let him die.

“It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life,” Elijah prayed.

But the Lord had other plans for Elijah. When the prophet fell asleep, an angel visited him, telling him to “arise and eat.” Elijah woke up and found a loaf of bread and a jar of water nearby. After eating and drinking, he fell back asleep, only to have the angel wake him again.

“Arise and eat; because the journey is too great for thee,” the angel said.

After eating and drinking again, Elijah received the strength he needed for the next part of his journey. (See 1 Kings 19:1–8.)

Like Elijah, each of us travels through a personal desert of despair at times. For some, that desert may seem never-ending. When we feel hopeless, we can cry out to God. He hears us. He wants us to continue our mortal journey. His help can take many different forms, including friends, family members, professional and medical resources, gospel realizations, and other resources as varied as are our experiences and needs. As we use this help, we invite strength, hope, and purpose into our lives.



If you, or someone you love, is struggling to feel hope, here is a collection of ideas and information that may help. Because each situation is different and these are only general ideas, be sure to use those that seem most helpful to you. And if the hopeless feelings continue for months or become intense, please reach out to trusted family members, friends, professional counselors, or others you feel can help. You are not alone!

REPLACE TWISTED THINKING WITH TRUTH

Sometimes feelings of hopelessness come when, instead of seeing things clearly, our view of life becomes temporarily twisted. This distorted thinking can happen when disappointing and unexpected things occur—like a rejection, betrayal, trauma, or loss—and we can't make sense of those events. Smaller daily triggers that accumulate over time can also open the floodgates to negative thinking. Psychologist Dr. Martin Seligman wrote about three common thought distortions:¹

- *Permanence.* Things will never change or get better.
- *Pervasiveness.* Because something negative happened in one area of life, my entire life is a failure.
- *Personalization.* Everything is my fault, whether or not it was truly in my control.²

Do any of these sound familiar? The next time you notice a twisted thought, try to replace it with one that is more accurate. It might even be helpful to write down the distorted thought, cross it out, and write the more accurate thought instead. For example:

~~“I’m so lonely tonight. I’m doomed to be lonely forever.”~~

“Even though I feel lonely now, I can’t see the future. Tomorrow is another chance to meet new people.”

~~“I got another bad review at work, and that proves I can’t do anything right.”~~

“Work doesn’t define my whole life. I have other relationships and talents.”

~~“The abuse was my fault. I should’ve done more to protect myself.”~~

“The abuse was not my fault. I was an innocent victim.”

Dr. Seligman also recommended doing something that might seem difficult when we are feeling down in the dumps: try to recognize our “signature strengths.”³ Perhaps reading the list of spiritual gifts in Moroni 10:8–18 will help you

identify some of the strengths that are an important part of your character. The scriptures say that every single person is blessed with at least one gift of the Spirit (see Doctrine and Covenants 46:11), and we shouldn’t let the adversary tell us otherwise!

Finally, another suggestion from Dr. Seligman might sound familiar. He recommended that we name what we are grateful for.⁴ Counting our blessings isn’t just the title of a hymn—it’s an action that can help replace bitterness with hope.⁵ It can remind us that our loving Heavenly Father is eager to bless us in ways both seen and unseen.

FIND SAFE WAYS TO COPE

What else can we do when hopeless feelings hit hard? Try to remember what activities have helped you feel better in the past. Sometimes, focusing outward helps—research has shown that compassionately helping others may be a powerful tool for feeling less anxious and depressed.⁶ Other times, we may benefit from taking a walk or getting extra sleep. One young man immersed himself in listening to and playing music. A woman found that going to the movies helped interrupt the cycle of negative thinking, giving her a much-needed rest.

Husband-and-wife scholars Dr. Steven Wolin and Dr. Sybil Wolin identified traits that help people be resilient during challenges. Two of those were humor and creativity⁷—activities that Church leaders have spoken about. For example, Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin (1917–2008) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles said: “The next time you’re tempted to groan, you might try to laugh instead. It will extend your life.”⁸ And Elder Richard G. Scott (1928–2015) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles once wrote: “Attempt to be creative, even if the results are modest. . . . Creativity can engender a spirit of gratitude for life.”⁹

Try a variety of ideas, and don’t be surprised if they are uncomfortable at first; sometimes trying to access coping skills is most difficult right when we need them the most. When you find something that you are able to do that provides relief, start making a list of those things. Then, when hopeless feelings come, pull out the list and go through each suggestion. If after trying everything you still feel hopeless, it may be a good time to reach out to a professional for help.¹⁰



SHOW COMPASSION TO YOURSELF

What if, for one week, we were only able to say *out loud* to other people the phrases we told ourselves *inwardly* each day? Some of us might discover that our self-talk is harsher than anything we would say to others. What if we flipped that inner dialogue—only saying to ourselves what we would say to a dear friend? Perhaps we would notice a change in our feelings as we approached our inner selves with more compassion.

Psychology professor Dr. Kristin Neff once spoke about a time her autistic son threw a tantrum on an airplane. Feeling the sting of judgmental looks from other passengers, and overwhelmed by her son's continued screaming despite her best efforts to calm him, Dr. Neff realized she could show compassion to herself in that moment. Instead of echoing the criticism in her mind, she chose comforting and hopeful thoughts along the lines of, "This is so hard. I'm sorry you have to go through this. I'm here for you."¹¹

As President Russell M. Nelson once pointed out, the commandment "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" (Matthew 22:39) has two parts—loving others but also loving ourselves!¹² When, during hard times, other help becomes scarce, each one of us has the power to be our own compassionate friend.

TURN TOWARD GOD'S LIGHT

Depression and emotional suffering are not spiritual failings. And living the gospel won't always prevent pain and sorrow. But when we turn to God, even in small ways, the light of His love can refresh and renew our souls. "Even though we may feel lost in the midst of our current circumstances, God promises the hope of His light," taught Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.¹³ He also observed, "We learn to cultivate hope the same way we learn to walk, one step at a time."¹⁴ On some days, the steps we take toward God's light might be small. But each prayer offered, each commandment kept, and each scripture read is a victory. These acts of faith will nourish our souls and help us "abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost" (Romans 15:13).

Meanwhile, Satan wants you to believe that hope is not possible for you—that you've made too many mistakes to deserve love, for example. Like clouds that mask the warmth of the sun, these lies and life's challenges can keep us from feeling the abundance of hope and happiness that exists. But our Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ are always there. They love us. They want to help us find peace.

Sister Sharon Eubank recently encouraged us to "take courage" when we feel darkness closing in. "I testify you are



Visit [mentalhealth.ChurchofJesusChrist.org](https://www.mentalhealth.ChurchofJesusChrist.org) to watch a video entitled “Like a Broken Vessel.”

beloved. The Lord knows how hard you are trying,” she said. “Take a few more steps on the covenant path, even if it’s too dark to see very far. The lights will come back on.”¹⁵

It’s important to acknowledge that in some cases, divine healing won’t come in this life. For example, a person with mental illness may experience—through no fault of their own—persistent hopelessness and anxiety, a frequent inability to feel the Spirit, or any number of other challenges. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland spoke about mental illness when he said: “If you are the one afflicted or a caregiver to such, try not to be overwhelmed with the size of your task. Don’t assume you can fix everything, but fix what you can. If those are only small victories, be grateful for them and be patient.”¹⁶

Sometimes just making it through the day is the victory. Elder Dale G. Renlund of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles testified that even on those days, the Savior is with us: “If the best you can do is to get up and out of bed in the morning, just know that He’s there with you.”¹⁷

Visit [mentalhealth.ChurchofJesusChrist.org](https://www.mentalhealth.ChurchofJesusChrist.org) for additional inspiration and resources about coping with mental illness.

CHOOSE LIFE

Because ongoing suffering can lead to hopelessness and even suicidal thoughts, it may be helpful to address a few

basics about suicide here. While suicide is complex and has no single cause, a common thread for those who struggle with suicidal thoughts is that they feel hopeless and helpless about the challenges they face.

Did you know that people who attempt suicide do not necessarily want to die? Rather, they want relief from the pain they are experiencing. If you are worried that a loved one is thinking about suicide, ask them about it directly and with compassion. If they tell you they’ve been thinking about suicide, and especially if they have a plan to harm themselves, help them connect with professional help right away. The site [suicide.ChurchofJesusChrist.org](https://www.suicide.ChurchofJesusChrist.org) has tips for holding a conversation like this, as well as additional resources on the topic.

And if *you* are the one struggling, please don’t give up! Help is available. As Elder Holland said: “Whatever your struggle, my brothers and sisters—mental or emotional or physical or otherwise—do not vote against the preciousness of life by ending it! Trust in God. Hold on in His love. Know that one day the dawn will break brightly and all shadows of mortality will flee.”¹⁸ Reach out to those who can help you find healthy ways to cope with your pain. There is no shame in experiencing these feelings, and there is no shame in asking for help when you need it.¹⁹

BREAD OF LIFE, LIVING WATER

The prophet Elijah was given bread and water to strengthen and sustain him. When we consider that Jesus Christ is the Bread of Life and Living Water, this part of Elijah's story becomes beautifully symbolic of the nourishment that is constantly available to each of us. No matter what form our desert of despair takes, Jesus Christ is there with us. And let's be compassionate to each other along this journey of life! We, like the angel in Elijah's story, can help the weary travelers we meet find the strength to carry on. ■

NOTES

1. See Martin E. P. Seligman, *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life* (2006), 44–51.
2. There are other cognitive distortions people commonly grapple with, such as “catastrophizing,” or consistently believing that the worst is going to happen. Learning more about cognitive distortions may help you identify and replace them in your own thinking.
3. See Martin E. P. Seligman, *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment* (2002), 134–61.
4. See Seligman, *Authentic Happiness*, 70–75.
5. See “Count Your Blessings,” *Hymns*, no. 241.
6. See the article “Compassionate and self-image goals as interpersonal maintenance factors in clinical depression and anxiety,” *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 12 September 2017.
7. See Steven J. Wolin and Sybil Wolin, *The Resilient Self: How Survivors of Troubled Families Rise Above Adversity* (1993).
8. Joseph B. Wirthlin, “Come What May, and Love It,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2008, 27.
9. Richard G. Scott, *Finding Peace, Happiness, and Joy* (2007), 162–63.
10. This process of identifying coping skills to use during a crisis is sometimes referred to as creating a safety plan. For a more complete outline of a suicide-prevention safety plan, see page 63 of the Sept. 2016 *Ensign*.
11. See Kristin Neff, “The Space between Self-Esteem and Self-Compassion” (TEDx talk), [youtube.com/watch?v=IvtZBUSpr4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IvtZBUSpr4).
12. See Russell M. Nelson, “Joy Cometh in the Morning,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1986, 68.
13. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “The Hope of God's Light,” *Ensign*, May 2013, 70.
14. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “The Infinite Power of Hope,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2008, 23.
15. Sharon Eubank, “Christ: The Light That Shines in Darkness,” *Ensign*, May 2019, 75–76.
16. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Like a Broken Vessel,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2013, 41.
17. Dale G. Renlund, from a video on the page “Doctrine and Principles” on suicide.ChurchofJesusChrist.org.
18. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Like a Broken Vessel,” 42.
19. In many countries, a 24-hour crisis line is available for those who need help. Some countries even have a text-message option. In the United States, text 741741. In Canada, text 686868.

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ELDER JEFFREY B. HOLLAND

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