

How to Overcome Your Feelings of Hopelessness

By Robert Leahy, PhD

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Are there times you just feel like giving up? Do you feel like you're being backed into the wall but there's nowhere to run and no reason to move? If you catch yourself saying, "Why bother?" you may be experiencing hopelessness but you're not alone. Dr. Robert Leahy shares five ways to help you beat your sadness for good.

To get started, take a moment to review the litany of thoughts constantly running through your head. Do you think any of the following statements:

- Why bother? Nothing will work out.
- I'll never be happy.
- My relationship can never get better.
- I'll never be able to get what I want.
- There's no use in trying.
- There aren't any good men (women) left.
- I'm too old (ugly, poor, boring, damaged, etc.)
- I can't compete.
- I'm cursed. The world is against me.

As a result of your hopelessness, you don't see your friends, you isolate yourself, you don't exercise, you don't try anything new. And that just adds to your depression and hopelessness. You spiral down in a whirlpool of sadness.

While writing *Beat the Blues Before They Beat You*, I realized the single most important issue to address for someone who is depressed is her feeling of hopelessness. If you are absolutely convinced that life is hopeless, then you won't do anything to help yourself. But no matter how hopeless it seems, there are things you can do—right now—that can help you find a way out.

First: Doubt your hopelessness



Doubt Your Hopelessness

If you're hopeless, you're bound to have thoughts like: "It's hopeless, so it would be a waste of time to try." And because of this, you don't do anything, and you remain hopeless. And, in your thinking, this further confirms that you're right. Your hopelessness becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

So, try something different. First, make the decision to doubt your hopelessness. Simply entertain the notion that you could be wrong. You've been wrong before; maybe you're wrong now. And then, with that inkling of doubt, decide to act against your hopelessness. You can act as if things aren't hopeless by taking initiative, experimenting with optimism ("Let me try to make the best of this"), doing things you don't "want" to do but that possibly could make things better—exercise, see friends, be more upbeat. Prove your hopelessness wrong by acting as if things are better already. It won't be easy, but it makes a world of difference, and just imagine what could happen.

Next: Try something new



Try Something New

My patients often feel hopeless because they think they've tried everything to make life better. But, let's be serious, no one has tried everything. Maybe you've tried 10 things—changing some behavior, therapy, medication, etc. When none of these things change your life drastically, you conclude, "See, it's hopeless." But there are different kinds of therapy, different techniques and combinations of different medications to try. Aside from outside help, you might consider giving up on ways of thinking and acting that haven't worked for you: worrying, complaining, avoiding, isolating and taking things personally. Every time you catch yourself doing one of these things, remind yourself that it just doesn't work. But other things might work: accepting, tolerating discomfort, doing what you don't want to do but what could be good for you.

Next: Look a what isn't hopeless



Look at What Isn't Hopeless

You may get stuck focusing on what you can't change instead of looking at the wide range of things you can change. Let's say your relationship actually is hopeless: You've broken up and there is no mending that partnership. So yes, that really is hopeless now. But how about all the other things in your life you can change—things you can do? Stop banging your head against a wall that won't move, and walk through the door that is swinging wide open for you.

Next: Realize no one thing is necessary for your happiness



Realize No One Thing Is Necessary for Your Happiness

You don't feel hopeless about trivial things, do you? No one says, "Life is hopeless because there's a puddle of water on the sidewalk." You are telling yourself that the thing that won't change is essential: "I can't live without it." Why not? You lived before you had it. If the relationship or job really turned out to be hopeless, weren't you living a life before it? Start living again...like you did before.

Next: Appreciate the present



Appreciate the Present

Stop and think about what is happening right now. Is this moment hopeless? Sit quietly, noticing your breath, letting it in and out, watching it come and go. Feel your feet against the floor. Hear the sounds around you. Peel an orange and smell the tang within. Listen to the music and feel the notes run through you. The present is here, every moment, every day. When the future is gone and you live fully alive here and now, you put an end to hopelessness. Appreciating the moment will make you forget about the hopelessness.

Robert L. Leahy, PhD is the director of the American Institute for Cognitive Therapy in New York City and clinical professor of psychology at Weill-Cornell Medical School. He has served as the president of the Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapy, the International Association for Cognitive Psychotherapy and the Academy of Cognitive Therapy. He received the Aaron T. Beck Award for Outstanding Contributions in Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy. His most recent book is Beat the Blues Before They Beat You (Hay House, August 2010).