HOPE, Entry #1 of 11

For many of us, early recovery was difficult. Facing the prospect of life without drugs can be very frightening (IP#23 Staying Clean on the Outside).

We usually think of “hope” as a good thing, but it comes with a catch: Realizing our hopes involves going through change. Some things seem better when we’re wishing for them than when we get them. No matter how green the grass looks on the other side, change always seems to stir up a lot of fear and anxiety.

One member shared that he struggled when he first came to NA because he had a hard time with the idea of living the rest of his life without drugs. “I heard addicts share that they could manage a day without using, and I realized that all I had to try was not using just for today. They gave me hope.” Our Basic Text mentions this same principle: “Most of us can do for eight or twelve hours what seems impossible for a longer period of time. If the obsession or compulsion becomes too great, put yourself on a five minute basis of not using. Minutes will grow to hours, and hours to days…”

Many of us had wishes about getting clean before we came to NA, but we didn’t see how a life without drugs could possibly become a reality for us until we heard addicts just like us share how they had done it. Hope begins when we shift our vision from the seemingly endless journey ahead to the few steps in front of us. Life without drugs seems impossible, but five minutes without drugs is doable.

The same is true for any change we wish for in our lives: getting out of treatment or jail, changing jobs or moving, switching sponsors, or becoming more open and vulnerable with our partner. Imagining the “new” life that awaits us on the other side of any big change can be intimidating, but we don’t have to live that new life all at once. We talk to members who have made similar changes, and they share their experience with us. We find hope by listening to other addicts. We begin to see how we can get through the next five minutes, the next few hours, the rest of the day. As it turns out, the grass is greener when we water it.

The difference between wishing and hoping is that hope lets me see a way forward. I will share a wish with my sponsor and ask for help in transforming it into hope.
HOPE, Entry #2 of 11

While abstinence is the beginning, our only hope for recovery is a profound emotional and spiritual change (It Works, Step One).

Being new in NA is a crash course in hope. At first, our hope only needs to last as long as the distance to our phone. Will we call our new friend in NA when that obsession to use clouds our commitment to stay clean today—or our dealer? We hope for the former, but most of us, in early days, have reservations. Do we even want to stop using? Can we? In a meeting, someone shares, “H.O.P.E. is an acronym for Hold On, Pain Ends.” Yikes, more like, Hell On Planet Earth!

Others of us are sure that we’re done, done, done with using forever and ever and ever. But then we’re told by someone to slow our roll, as it’s “just for today” round here. If that’s the case, do we even dare to hope for a better life than the one we can see in tomorrow's future?

Soon we hear, and eventually absorb, the idea that abstinence does not equal recovery. “Our disease doesn’t just manifest physically in our reliance on drugs and messed-up behaviors,” an NA member clarifies, “It’s mental, emotional, and spiritual, too. So, we need solutions that touch all of it. When we stop using, it’s merely the start of our recovery.”

Our H.O.P.E. evolves to a deeper version: Hearing Other People’s Experience. We transition from merely wanting some short-term relief from our obsessions and destructive behaviors to desiring significant change in other areas of our lives that we believe might be possible, based on observations of other members’ long-term experiences. They did the work. So can I.

We don’t passively hope for a meaningful recovery beyond abstinence. We treat our addiction with the program and principles of NA. We learn to let go of our self-obsession and embrace humility through working Steps. Application of the Traditions in our lives leads us to contribute to the greater good of NA and our communities. H.O.P.E. becomes Helping Other People Everyday.

Hope helps me to be abstinent today. As I continue to treat my whole disease with vigilance and perseverance, I will keep hope alive, deepening and sustaining my recovery.
HOPE, Entry #3 of 11

When we choose not to look through the lens of resentment and entitlement, we can see the world as it is and find beauty in it even when it’s challenging. Each day is filled with opportunities either to escape reality or to show up and live (Living Clean, Chapter 7, “Living Our Principles”).

An old saying has it that “fear makes the wolf bigger than it is.” The howls of that big, bad, metaphorical wolf—symbolizing all of life’s challenges—threaten from a distance, even in recovery, making us susceptible to resentment. Our improved emotional health may even increase our awareness of the howling. Life can indeed be scary, but today we have tools and choices. We no longer have to live in terror. Recovery allows us to make peace with rational fears, to free ourselves from resentment, and to face life on its own terms.

As we work the Steps, we begin to recognize how fear shaped our responses to life, past and present. We see how we papered over our fear with resentment, fantasy, despair, anger, or a sense of entitlement. We learn how our shortcomings correlate with our fears, provoking us to push people away or hold them too close. We manipulated, bullied, or retreated from reality only to find ourselves increasingly isolated and our lives more and more unmanageable.

Although we’re clean today, fear still crops up. We hear that wolf howling: Why me? Am I up to this task? Am I worthy of love? Instead of shutting down or pushing back in the face of existential questions, recovery opens us up to a different approach. Our insecurities no longer have to dominate our outlook, direct our thinking, or dictate our behavior. We can be present in the struggle and find meaning and beauty as we meet life’s challenges with clarity and purpose.

Both hope and fear ask us to believe in something that hasn’t happened. Either can influence how we perceive our conditions and our future. To the best of our abilities, we choose hope. If fear makes the wolf seem bigger, then maybe we can say that hope tames the wolf. Life’s challenges are a little less intimidating when we allow hope to shape our view of the world and inform our responses.

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I will face one of the metaphorical wolves in my life and let hope inspire courage and positive action.
HOPE, Entry #4 of 11

When we see a member experience a real breakthrough with 20, or 30, or more years clean, we can see that, truly, recovery never stops (Living Clean, Chapter 7, “Love”).

As a Twelve Step program, stairs are an easy go-to metaphor we often use to describe the recovery process. We climb up out of the darkness and despair of active addiction into the light of recovery. Some members say that the farther we go up the staircase, the more we have to lose should we go tumbling back down again. Living Clean describes recovery like a spiral staircase: “Again and again we come to the same view, only each time we are seeing it from a different perspective.” One member shared with a laugh, “My staircase feels more like one of those trippy optical illusion paintings where the stairs circle back on each other and the laws of physics don’t apply.”

The longer we stay clean, the more life we experience. And when we’re actively working our program, we experience life deeply and continue to encounter more truth about ourselves all the time. Finding a new way to live takes on a different meaning when we stay clean for decades. We discover ourselves, reinvent ourselves, lose ourselves, find ourselves, discover ourselves—again and again and again. The staircase circles back on itself.

When we stay clean through it all and stay active in NA, much of our process is visible to those around us. It can be messy. We may grow in ways that cause us to drift apart from some friends in recovery. We may form new connections with other members we never thought we would get close to. We might have moments where we feel silly or slow for having a realization about ourselves so far down the path, only to have our friends respond, “oh, yeah—we’ve known that about you for a long time.”

Few of us end up having the lives that we would have expected to have—or even being the people we would have expected to be—when we first got clean. Our fellow members love us through it all. No matter how far along we are, when we share our new discoveries, we share our hope.

My journey may not look like what I expected—or what I think others expected. As my horizons broaden, I will relish each discovery and freely share what I have learned so others can see how my journey continues.
HOPE, Entry #5 of 11

We don’t have to deny reality to have hope or gratitude. We feel what we feel, and we do the footwork anyway (Living Clean, Chapter 7, “Living Our Principles”).

A lot of us have had a moment when we are going through something difficult, and a fellow recovering addict shares their opinion that “feelings aren’t facts”—and we want to chop their head off. Perhaps more helpful is this fact: Feelings are real—and one thing we learn in NA is that we can feel them and survive them. We do so, not merely by grasping onto hope that they’ll change soon, but by taking actions in spite of them. As one addict rhymed, we “feel, deal, and heal.”

We deal by engaging the familiar NA footwork: going to meetings, sharing the feelings, and listening for solutions; doing stepwork around an issue, such as our resistance to change; praying and meditating; and focusing on others, not just our own strife. And of course, there’s the footwork that’s specific to our particular situation. Loss of employment, for instance, requires footwork to replace it. A mental health issue might warrant an appointment with a professional. We retake a course we failed or initiate lifestyle changes to improve our health. We end a marriage. We certainly aren’t guaranteed a pain-free life in recovery, and sometimes the footwork is painful, too.

A fresh perspective, especially when infused with gratitude and hope, helps us heal. When we lose that job, many of us will go down the road of fear and self-pity. Taking a moment to shift our perspective to one of gratitude (I have come so far) and hope (There are other opportunities out there for me)—and faith, too (I’ll be okay no matter what)—won’t deny us our very real feelings. Instead, perspective keeps reasonable feelings of sadness and fear from morphing into abject despair or oversized anxiety. We don’t wait until the fear has gone, or the stress or anger or sorrow, before we get back on the path. The feelings might still linger, but we’re moving, letting change happen, even taking risks. We’re healing.

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I may not like where I am right now, but I can still be grateful. I can deal with my feelings by working a program and striving to change my perspective. Through NA, and in my relationships with fellow addicts, I find the hope I need to heal.
HOPE, Entry #6 of 11

When we can separate hope from wishing or expectation, it stops feeling like such a setup (Living Clean, Chapter 7, “Living Our Principles”).

In the final weekend of the football season, it’s common to hear fans utter a familiar refrain: “It’s the hope that kills you.” Maybe it’s smart to restrain our optimism if winning the championship has been elusive year after year. Football fans know that a bad decision, a lousy play, or rotten luck will crush hopes.

In life, as in football, it might seem that we dare to dream at our peril. Few of us get through life without enduring a heartbreak or two. There may be times when we swear off hope, effectively putting the kibosh on our aspirations. But that’s no way to live. A broken heart has loved, after all.

Yes, hope can lead to disappointment, but it can also usher us to new heights. “Hope is what gets me going in the right direction. It gives me a sense that I can do something to realize my dreams,” one member wrote. Hope motivates me to persevere, to put in the effort. Hoping but not doing the work? That’s just making a wish.”

Of course, we can move in the right direction and still get caught offside. Our projections about what it takes to achieve a dream aren’t always accurate. Sometimes we get what we’d worked and prayed for only to discover that we were left wanting. Recovery can help us through all of that. We learn to survive our expectations and the emotions attached to them, not do without them. We allow ourselves to feel hope and also to tolerate disappointment or redirection.

Hope is daring to dream, doing the footwork, and landing on our feet. No matter how it pans out, we are stronger, more resilient, even more hopeful for having taken those risks.

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Recovery gives me the courage to hope. I can take action and exert influence on the world around me. If things don’t work out as I’d hoped—and if my team loses again—I will cope.
HOPE, Entry #7 of 11

We have a message of hope to carry. It’s a gift and an obligation (Living Clean, Chapter 2, “Connection to Others”).

After coming to NA for a while, most of us eventually hear that question from family or friends: “How long do you have to keep going to those meetings?” Maybe we have even wondered the same thing ourselves. And then we’re lucky enough to see a sponsee, right in the middle of working Step Two, open up to the idea of staying clean, just for today—for the rest of their lives.

One of the first gifts most of us receive in NA is hope, and it’s one that we continue to carry to newcomers even as other gifts pile up around us. NA promises only freedom from active addiction. For most of us, that freedom often makes it possible for us to achieve so much more—repaired relationships, self-esteem, employability, trust, the ability to love and be loved, financial security. When our lives, hearts, bank accounts, and bellies get fuller, we might find ourselves showing up to meetings a bit less regularly. In some cases, we might even feel like life is so good that we don’t even need meetings.

We say it over and over: “We can only keep what we have only by giving it away.” The more regularly we share our experience with others, the more regularly we are reminded of the hope that we have found in NA. A member shared, “I need to tell lots of newcomers what worked for me when my ass was on fire so that when I start smelling smoke again, someone will be here to remind me how to put it out.”

Our first dose of hope was about getting clean, and we saw many other hopes become reality as we stayed clean and worked the Steps. We owe it to ourselves and to NA to share our hope with other addicts. We share how we get through our difficulties and how we achieve our successes. We share not just so that they will gain some hope, but so that we will keep some, too.

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To keep my hope fresh, I will keep sharing about how I’m living clean today. I share my hope freely with others, knowing that I always have somewhere to go when I need someone to share hope with me.
HOPE, Entry #8 of 11

We may not relate exactly to one another’s dreams, but we can relate to the hope, energy, and excitement of trying to realize them (*Living Clean*, Chapter 2, “Connection to Others”).

One of recovery’s greatest gifts—and its joys—is seeing another NA member’s hopes and dreams become realized. We are there when someone in our homegroup plants a seed of an idea into their own life, where it takes root in the dirt below and sprouts a stem that stretches toward the sun. We witness them take all the necessary steps to bring their goal to fruition, in spite of struggles with self-doubt and some real setbacks. We celebrate each other’s successes at graduations and weddings; for births, adoptions, and reunifications; at launchings, openings, and housewarmings; and at the finish line—or just by hearing about them at a meeting.

We are inspired, even if our own seed of an idea is very different, or even if we don’t yet have a seed of our own. Most of us would agree that the specific details of our stories of active addiction don’t have to be the same as another addict’s in order for us to empathize, even identify with them. The same can be said regarding our specific ideas about how we want to enrich our lives. There are as many paths to freedom as there are addicts, and just as many paths to joy, success, contentment, and fulfillment.

Seeing others follow their dreams can inspire hope in us to find and follow our own. At different periods of our journey, hope may inspire us in different realms, like employment, family and relationships, using our intellect, our creativity. As one addict quipped, “I used to climb the walls, and now I climb mountains.” Bearing witness to each other’s journeys is a boon. We can learn from each other’s mistakes, without having to make the same ones ourselves. What looks impossible or undesirable to us in early recovery may appeal to us later on—and transform our lives. We get most of our best ideas from each other.

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*I can find inspiration in my fellow recovering addicts—sometimes despite the details and sometimes because of them. Today, I have hope for my own future, and I’m willing to do what I can to inspire others to find the hope that they lost or never had.*
HOPE, Entry #9 of 11

Hope begins when we think that it might be possible for us to stop using against our own will and stay clean. (*Living Clean*, Chapter 7, “Living Our Principles”).

By the time many of us show up to our first meeting, we have broken the trust of many people in our lives. For some of us, there wasn’t a single person left in our lives who would believe us even if we told them the sun rises in the east. No matter how many people we burned in active addiction, over and over again, one person was more likely than any to be skeptical of anything we said—ourselves.

This is one of the huge stumbling blocks that stops many of us from truly feeling hope when we first get clean. We know ourselves! We can’t be trusted. Sometimes people in our lives looked at the way we used and accused us of having no willpower, but the truth of the matter was that we had so much self-will that we had lost all freedom to choose. There was no space between our impulses and our actions. Getting clean? Sure, no problem—we can do that just fine; that is, just until we feel like using. Then, all bets are off.

One of the most courageous things we have to do in order to get clean is to admit a little bit of hope into our spirit, defying all of the evidence to the contrary we have amassed in our active addiction. People who use the way we use don’t get clean. But then, we find ourselves in rooms filled with people who used the way we used. And they’re clean...allegedly. Maybe, is it possible?

Self-will, impulsive behavior, obsession, and compulsion—even though many of us came to NA blaming the world around us for our problems, a lot of us felt, deep down, that we were too flawed to have the lives we wanted. In NA, we found people with flaws just as deep as ours, and they taught us how to become free.

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*It’s hard to see a way forward when I am standing in my own way. I will let other addicts show me how to step aside and find a way out.*
HOPE, Entry #10 of 11

We find [hope] again and again as our journey continues: In the dark moments when we realize we can go on anyway, and in our triumphs—it is possible (Living Clean, Chapter 7, “Living Our Principles”).

The first bit of hope we experienced in NA came from a place of defeat. Using drugs hadn’t worked for us. Our grand experiment of solving our living problems with mind- and mood-altering substances was a profound failure. In that dark place, though, a ray of light shone through: We could find a way out of addiction and into recovery.

Once we have been clean for a while, many of our hopes come from more positive places. We think about how much more we can accomplish with our career goals, our creative endeavors, our loving relationships. Maybe we want to sponsor more addicts or try out new service positions.

Having hope for the good things that will come our way is great, but we would do well to remember how much more precious hope can be when we have very little of it. We are bound to experience tremendous disappointments when we stay clean for years and decades, some of which rattle us to our very core. We bury parents, children, siblings, or spouses—and lots of fellow addicts. We lose jobs and relationships, we make terrible mistakes, and hurt people we love. Guilt, shame, and loneliness take up so much space in the room that it’s hard to make any room for hope, even when it is what we need most desperately.

Hope is why we must stay in the practice of going to meetings, sharing, calling our sponsor, reading literature, and talking to other addicts when life is going well for us. We get to see clean addicts find their way through incredible difficulties by showing up—no matter how fragile or broken—and putting themselves in the position to receive some hope. When we find ourselves there, fragile or broken, we think of the others we have seen walk through it, and we know it can be done. We must go on—together, we can.

I will pay attention to members going through the unthinkable and do my best to offer them hope. If I am one of those members, I will go where I know I can find hope—to an NA meeting.
HOPE, Entry #11 of 11

Narcotics Anonymous offers hope to addicts around the world, regardless of any real or imagined differences that might separate us (Guiding Principles, Tradition One, opening essay).

“If addiction doesn’t discriminate, then hope doesn’t either,” a speaker shared during an international marathon meeting held online. “And neither should we.”

Our hope lives at the intersection of anonymity, unity, acceptance, and inclusiveness. We believe that any addict can get and stay clean in NA, no matter who we are, what we’ve done, where we live, or any aspect of ourselves that, on the surface, would seem to separate us. To help us feel like we belong, we encourage each other to look for the similarities, not the differences; to focus on the message, not the messenger. We strive to bring this openness to visitors to our homegroup, to meetings and NA events we have the privilege to attend in unfamiliar settings with unfamiliar setups, in other areas, in other countries, in other languages.

The universality of hope in our program and our message doesn’t diminish the fact that there are differences among us, real ones. As important as it is for us to take responsibility to see past our own differences, we have perhaps an even greater responsibility to be inclusive of those who may have experiences or identities that depart from the group’s majority. Actively including others assures a place for each of us and elevates hope for all of us in the rooms.

To give hope to those who feel intimidated or unheard by the majority, some of us find it important to establish meetings that embrace a similarity of experience or identity. There is room for this diversity of hope’s expression within NA; autonomy also ensures that addicts are able to find each other in ways that are welcoming and safe—and acknowledge and honor the similarities inherent within our differences.

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NA’s message of hope is heard around the world. I am an integral part of this whole. Today I strive to receive that message from whoever offers it and to take responsibility for carrying it to whoever needs it.