

# Hope as a Living Thing: The Case for Regenerative Hope

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What does it mean to have hope about the work we do? We often think of hope as a specific emotional state based on openness or positive expectations, but *having hope* refers more to a mindset or a philosophy. Many people working on the frontlines in challenging fields like education or social work often have moments of hopelessness about their work. Nevertheless, people work in these taxing fields for decades, propelled by some underlying feeling that their efforts are worthwhile (Ettarh, 2018). In other words, they *have hope* even if they do not always experience what we think of as hope.

Climate change tends to produce anxiety, pessimism, and burnout, especially among those addressing the problem in their work (APA, 2019). While these emotions are practically inevitable in the face of a problem as large and unprecedented as climate change, they hinder efforts to address the climate crisis when we get “stuck” in them (Folkman, 2008). Hope has become a topic of interest in climate change education as a necessary motivator for taking action and working productively towards solutions. Various types of hopes have been proposed in the literature, though they all seem to fall short in some ways when applying them to climate change:

- 1) **Existential hope** is based in beliefs of the inherent goodness in the world. In climate change, this can lead to passivity.  
*“Everything will work out in the end.”*
- 2) **Constructive hope** is more action-oriented but is rarely based in a critical understanding of the problem space, like the systemic injustices at the root of climate change.  
*“We must take action – everyone needs to do what they can to combat climate change.”*
- 3) **Critical hope** is based in a critical understanding of the problem space but is meant to be agitative and may therefore be a distressing perspective to take in the long-term.  
*“The odds are against us, but we have no choice but to keep fighting.”*

To consistently work on a problem as large and complex as climate change, our goal needs to be less about the feeling of hope and more about *having hope*. What does hope look like as a long-term process? What would a concept of hope look like that explicitly takes into account feelings of hopelessness? What can we learn from practitioners sustaining hope in challenging fields that can inform the kind of hope that all of us need to address climate change? We have developed a concept of hope to serve as a learning goal for workforce development. We are in the process of conducting a study to learn about how practitioners across many fields sustain and regenerate hope about challenging mission-driven work.

## Regenerative Hope

None of the concepts of hope offered by the literature account for inevitable moments of *hopelessness*. Given the large scale and severity of climate change, people often feel powerless, expressing sentiments like “it’s too late” (APA, 2019). We argue instead that *hope is a living thing* – different types of hope and even hopelessness can co-exist and fluctuate within an individual’s cognitive and affective terrain. We see a need for a concept of hope in the climate change context that allows for this kind of emotional fluidity. We posit that hope is less about reaching a static state of positive

emotions and more about a dynamic process of generation and regeneration. We propose a conceptualization of hope in the climate change context, one that has a map back to itself, which we call “regenerative hope.”

We hypothesize that five conceptual and affective shifts may take place in mapping out the key features of regenerative hope:



From **reactive to proactive**. Hope is often seen as a reaction to cope with challenges and difficulties. On the contrary, we suggest that regenerative hope is proactive, such that it entails having the sensitivity to recognize sources of hope and the inclination to persevere with actions.



From **prescriptive to adaptive**. Current debates surrounding climate education and Education for Sustainability Development (ESD) have focused on prescribing the ideal type of hope to cultivate in people. On the other hand, hope is a multifaceted and complex construct (Ojala, 2017). Here, we suggest that various types of hope can co-exist within an individual. Depending on the situation and context, people can adapt to different types of hope.



From **constancy to fluctuation**. Hope is often associated with positive emotions, which motivates people to act. Ojala (2007, 2008) found a relationship between hope and worry in relation to global problems that motivate pro-environmental behaviors in young people. We recognize the fluctuation of emotions and highlight the importance of being able to regenerate hope when experiencing negative emotions.



From **passive to agentive**. Contrary to the public messaging for leaders and experts to “give hope” to the public, we take an agentive view towards hope that we all can be agents of hope, having the power to create hope for others and the world.



From **individual to collective**. While hope can be nurtured and experienced on an individual level, its transformative power may be in its ability to connect individuals. When hope is embraced collectively, it may sustain individual actions and catalyze change at a larger scale. Regenerative hope does not only renew an individual’s energy and strength, but also holds the aspiration to regenerate or transform the collective reality for the better.

## Ongoing Research

We have designed a study to test this working theory of regenerative hope. The purpose of the research is to understand the role of hope as a vital resource to sustain climate action and green jobs work. To this end, we are interviewing practitioners who work in challenging contexts across a broad range of professions (not necessarily climate- or environment-related) to identify the features of hope, understand the mechanism of its regeneration, and gain insights into the role of hope in sustaining actions. This research will answer the following questions:

- Do practitioners who work in challenging contexts experience hope? If so, what are the features of hope experienced by practitioners?
- What is the role of hope for practitioners who work in challenging contexts?

- What are the sources of hope identified by practitioners who work in challenging contexts?
- In what ways do practitioners generate and re-generate hope in challenging contexts?

We will apply lessons learned from a variety of professional contexts to the climate change context and provide valuable insight into supporting people to sustain climate actions while safeguarding their mental health and well-being. **If you or someone you know qualifies for this study and would like to participate, please see this link:**

[https://harvard.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_5tC4nTwLeq7SyGy](https://harvard.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_5tC4nTwLeq7SyGy)

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