Hope Emerges as Key to Success in Life

PSYCHOLOGISTS are finding that hope plays a surprisingly potent role in giving people a measurable advantage in realms as diverse as academic achievement, bearing up in onerous jobs and coping with tragic illness. And, by contrast, the loss of hope is turning out to be a stronger sign that a person may commit suicide than other factors long thought to be more likely risks.

"Hope has proven a powerful predictor of outcome in every study we've done so far," said Dr. Charles R. Snyder, a psychologist at the University of Kansas who has devised a scale to assess how much hope a person has.

For example, in research with 3,920 college students, Dr. Snyder and his colleagues found that the level of hope among freshmen at the beginning of their first semester was a more accurate predictor of their college grades than were their S.A.T. scores or their grade point averages in high school, the two measures most commonly used to predict college performance. The study was reported in part in the November issue of The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology.

"Students with high hope set themselves higher goals and know how to work to attain them," Dr. Snyder said. "When you compare students of equivalent intellectual aptitude and past academic achievements, what sets them apart is hope."

People who score high on the hope scale are understandably better able to bear up in dire circumstances, other researchers are finding. In a study of 57 people with paralysis from spinal cord injury, those who reported more hope, compared with those having little hope, had less depression, greater mobility (despite similar levels of injury), more social contacts and more sexual intimacy.

"Those with high hope were more adaptive in all realms, regardless of how long they had been injured, whether just a month or 40 years," said Dr. Timothy Elliott, a psychologist at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, who reported the study in the October issue of The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology.

"This kind of paralysis usually hits people in the prime of life," Dr. Elliott said. "About half of cases involve men under 30 who are victims of accidents and end up paralyzed for the rest of their lives."

Dr. Robert Steer, a psychologist at the University of Medicine and Dentistry in New Jersey, who has done research on hopelessness, said, "Most patients with severe diseases don't become hopeless if they are well adapted to life before their illness.

Other studies of patients with serious diseases like congestive heart failure have found that those who are more hopeful tend to maintain their involvement with life regardless of physical limitations.

Dr. Elliott also studied levels of hope in 81 rehabilitation nurses who care for paralysis patients. "These can be terribly difficult cases to work with because they often take out their anger and disappointment on nursing staff," Dr. Elliott said. "Nurses on rehab units have a very high rate of burnout and turnover."

Among the nurses, those who had higher levels of hope also reported fewer symptoms of burnout like mental exhaustion and emotional withdrawal from patients, Dr. Elliott said. His study will be reported in The Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology next year.

Hope, Dr. Elliott found, was strongly associated with the nurses' sense of personal accomplishment, which may insulate them from burnout. Although they got little recognition for their work, the nurses derived satisfaction from even trivial chores. "Hope lends a sense of existential meaning to what you do," Dr. Elliott said.

In devising a way to assess hope scientifically, Dr. Snyder went beyond the simple notion that hope is merely the sense that everything will turn out all right. "That notion is not concrete enough, and it blurs two key components of hope," Dr. Snyder said. "Having hope means believing you have both the will and the way to accomplish your goals, whatever they may be." Getting Out of a Jam

The scale assesses people's sense of having the essential means by asking, for instance, whether they typically find they can think of many ways to get out of a jam, or find ways to solve problems that discourage others. It measures will through such questions as whether people feel they have been fairly successful in life or usually pursue goals with great energy.

Despite the folk wisdom that "where there's a will there's a way," Dr. Snyder has found that the two are not necessarily connected. In a study of more than 7,000 men and women from 18 to 70 years old, Dr. Snyder discovered that only about 40 percent of people are hopeful in the technical sense of believing they typically have the energy and means to accomplish their goals, whatever those might be.

The study found that about 20 percent of the people believed in their ability to find the means to attain their goals, but said they had little will to do so. Another 20 percent have the opposite pattern, saying they had the energy to motivate themselves but little confidence that they would find the means.

The rest had little hope at all, reporting that they typically had neither the will nor the way.
"It's not enough just to have the wish for something," said Dr. Snyder. "You need the means, too. On the other hand, all the skills to solve a problem won't help if you don't have the willpower to do it." Traits Among the Hopeful

Dr. Snyder found that people with high levels of hope share several attributes:

* Unlike people who are low in hope, they turn to friends for advice on how to achieve their goals.
* They tell themselves they can succeed at what they need to do.
* Even in a tight spot, they tell themselves things will get better as time goes on.
* They are flexible enough to find different ways to get to their goals.
* If hope for one goal fades, they aim for another. "Those low in hope tend to become fixated on one goal, and persist even when they find themselves blocked," Dr. Snyder said. "They just stay at it and get frustrated."
* They show an ability to break a formidable task into specific, achievable chunks. "People low in hope see only the large goal, and not the small steps to it along the way," Dr. Snyder said.

Many researchers use a scale that measures not hope but the lack of it. The scale, developed by Dr. Aaron Beck and colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania, asks people how much they agree, for example, that there is no use trying to do anything in the future, or, that everything they try ends in failure.

Researchers who use the scale to study depression have found that hopelessness plays an especially important mental role, unlike other, more prominent symptoms like listlessness or sadness.

Research has even found that feelings of hopelessness are good predictors of how well people will fare in psychotherapy. Perhaps it is no surprise that researchers have also found that hopelessness is the best predictor of who will commit suicide.

In a 10-year study of 206 patients who reported thoughts of suicide but had not yet made an attempt, the patients' scores on the hopelessness scale was the single best predictor of whether they would go on to attempt suicide, Dr. Beck reported in a 1987 article in The American Journal of Psychiatry.

People who get a high score on the hope scale "have had as many hard times as those with low scores, but have learned to think about it in a hopeful way, seeing a setback as a challenge, not a failure," Dr. Snyder said. Nurturing a Brighter Outlook

He and his colleagues are trying to design programs to help children develop the ways of thinking found in hopeful people. "They've often learned their mental habit of hopefulness from a specific person, like a friend or teacher," Dr. Snyder said.

"Hope can be nurtured," he said. Dr. Snyder has made a videotape for that purpose, showing interviews with students who are high on hope, to help freshmen better handle the stress of their first year.

In a study by Dr. Lori Irving, a psychologist at the Palo Alto Veterans Affairs Hospital in California, women who viewed a videotape about cancer that had a hopeful script did more to change their health habits in a positive way, like getting Pap smears and quitting smoking, than did women who saw another one with the same information but without the positive wording.

The effect of the hopeful videotape was strongest on the women who had gotten a low score on the hopefulness scale. Dr. Snyder said similar approaches might work to raise hopefulness among children in impoverished neighborhoods.