

Book Review for Denis O'Hara Hope in counselling and psychotherapy

 pacja.org.au/2015/07/book-review-for-denis-ohara-hope-in-counselling-and-psychotherapy-2

[Return to Journal Articles](#)

Jenny Coburn, *Australian College of Applied Psychology*

Associate Professor Denis O'Hara's first book examines the role of hope in healing and personal growth, and argues that hope takes a central position both in life, and in the process of therapeutic change. He notes that despite hope being recognised as one of the "common factors in therapeutic change, and despite its frequent presence in our daily lives, it remains an elusive concept.

The American 19th century poet Emily Dickinson wrote that hope is "the *thing* with feathers that perches in our soul." (1890/1999, p. 19 my italics). In many ways, hope remains at the periphery of our conscious awareness, defying a concrete definition. This is a point that is embraced by this book. As noted in the preface, "Hope is everywhere yet hardly visible" (O'Hara, 2013, p. ix). One of the aims of this book is to bring hope out of the shadows and make it more visible and available to those of us who work with people therapeutically.

From a personal perspective, I was excited to review a book whose primary topic was hope. Having spent nearly two decades working in the addictions field as a counsellor, I had noticed that those individuals who were able to hope for something seemed to fare much better than the individuals who saw a blank future. Pretty quickly, I learnt that it was vital to meet the client where they were at, and begin the (sometimes difficult) work of engendering a robust sense of a future that contained some form of hope. Whilst working in drug rehabilitation units during the late 1990's heroin glut (when the impulse to use heroin often turned into a life or death decision) my urgency to find hope expanded to encompass not only the clientele our agency serviced, but also the workers within the service. Hope seemed to promote survival, both personal and professional. At that time, as now, there were not many texts written on facilitating hope within a therapeutic context. In many ways, this is the book I wish had been available to me 15 years ago!

So, it was with the shared assumption that hope is deeply connected to therapeutic change that I read this book. It is worth being conscious of the key assumptions that form the book's premise. The author argues that therapy often goes beyond what the client explicitly brings to a session to include more existential concerns. As such, hope earns its central place in the therapeutic encounter as a potential mechanism or conduit towards personal meaning making, and therefore, healing. O'Hara views hope as a "metaconstruct" that is "versatile enough to inform all approaches of counselling and

psychotherapy” (2013, p. 151), and therefore has potential appeal to a broad range of therapists or professions who work with people in a therapeutic way. As noted above, O’Hara makes the observation that hope is often not fully visible. It remains the half grasped “thing” that sits “in some indeterminate zone between the unconscious and the conscious” (2013, p. ix). Hence, skill is required to elicit hope, and work with hope constructively. He notes that the largely implicit nature of hope has meant that counselling training programs have “largely ignored” it as a topic of study (2013, p. 159). O’Hara hopes his book will make the concept of hope more explicit and better equip mental health professionals to inspire hope in others. The question is: to what extent might this book have the potential to fulfil these aims? Dependent on its readership, this book could be a very useful contributor to this ideal. My belief is this book makes an important contribution to this ideal.

The structure of the book:

The book itself is composed of 192 pages, divided into three main sections that reflect the three aims of the text, namely: (1) to provide the reader with a firm theoretical grounding in the idea of hope; (2) to explore how hope might be operationalised within a therapeutic context; and (3) to encourage ongoing research into hope. Each section has a number of short chapters that clearly and economically cover the topic under discussion.

Section 1: “Understanding the nature of hope” introduces generalised and particularised hope, and provides a theoretical grounding on hope across a range of disciplines including philosophy, nursing, psychology and counselling. This section also includes spirituality and hope. There are five relatively short chapters in this section that gradually shift the focus to how different theories of counselling and psychotherapy encourage hope. There is also a chapter devoted to despair and anxiety framed as a “loss of hope”. The section references the writings of Aquinas, Kant, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sartre, Marcel, Levinas, Moltmann, Pieper, Snyder and Kelly, among others. O’Hara acknowledges that “while it would be instructive to look at a wide range of traditions”, he has chosen those that “illustrate significantly different views of hope” (2013, p. 23). It is my view that this choice has kept the text clear and purposeful.

Section 2: “The practice of hope” begins with an examination of the therapists’ hope, arguing that making the nature and function of hope more explicit in training programs might open new avenues for personal and professional development. I felt perhaps more could be written about how hope might protect against counsellor burnout, although this is implied. This section includes three chapters that include specific strategies to use across different theories of counselling and psychotherapy – with attention to both implicit and explicit strategies. It concludes with a chapter on “Hope for those with severe and enduring psychological challenges”. Having worked with people with “severe and enduring” conditions, I appreciated the thoughtful way in which this chapter was composed.

Section 3: “The research-informed practitioner” encourages practitioners and students to conduct research into “key topics” within counselling and psychotherapy – “hope being one of these” (2013, p. 137). To assist with this, O’Hara provides a number of research instruments that relate to hope, wellbeing and the therapeutic alliance. He also provides a list of areas in which hope research could be expanded. Further resources including “Setting goals and a goals worksheet” are provided in the Appendix.

I chose to read this book from beginning to end because I was reviewing it. However, the book is structured so it could be read in a less linear fashion – dipping in (and out) as required. Whilst O’Hara does use the theoretical material within Section 1 as a platform upon which to build the next two sections, he does this mindfully – providing adequate explanations of how previously explained concepts fit together, and directing the reader to where more expansive commentary is located elsewhere in the book. Although this style did occasionally come across as being repetitive, it does have the advantage of allowing the book to be used in different ways. The reality is that not every reader will choose to read a book from cover to cover. Although moving around the text is possible, reading the first section “Understanding the nature of hope” could provide added enjoyment and depth to the reader’s experience of the book.

The author’s writing is clear. Every chapter concludes with a summary, and the author also provides summaries throughout the text. Although somewhat formulaic, this structure does make the text very easy to digest. Where appropriate, the author uses case-study material from his own private practice to illustrate the application of hope. Most chapters have “Questions for reflection and discussion” and/or activities. O’Hara also has a strong background in education, and these devices do provide some interesting ideas for classroom activities or discussions. Certainly, I will be incorporating some of the ideas raised in this book into my teaching.

I would recommend this book to practitioners, teachers of counselling / psychotherapy and supervisors. Higher education students would find the text easy to digest, and the practical ideas and resources are a welcome addition. After reading the book in its entirety, I felt that O’Hara has done well in providing a lean text that provides the tools to work with hope in a more insightful manner. The fulfilment of the book’s aims of better equipping mental health professionals to work with hope, and making hope more explicit in therapeutic training programs now rests with its readership.

References:

Dickinson, E. (1999). *Selected poems* New York, NY: Random House.

[Return to Journal Articles](#)

