

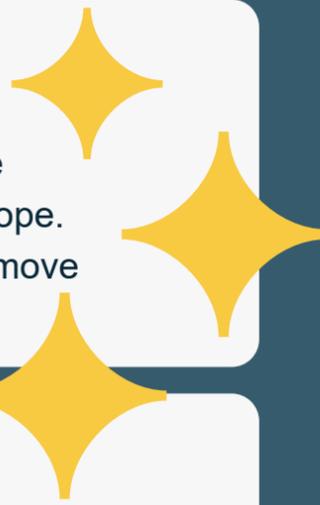


Building Agency and Willpower During Adversity

Science of Hope Community of Practice– September, 2025

WHY THIS MATTERS

Trauma and adversity can weaken a person's sense of control, drain motivation, and make goals feel out of reach. Agency and willpower, the belief and energy that **“I can reach my goals”**, are essential parts of hope. Strengthening them helps people persist, discover new pathways, and move toward meaningful change.



KEY CONCEPTS



Agency = belief in one's ability to act and influence outcomes.

Willpower = motivation and persistence to keep going.

Pathways = multiple routes for reaching a goal.



Trauma can disrupt all three, leading to avoidance, apathy, or loss of hope. Rebuilding them takes safety, trust, and small wins.



Protective factors and [Positive Childhood Experiences \(PCEs\)](#) strengthen agency and hope across the lifespan.

HOPE-CENTERED PRACTICE TIPS

- Break goals into smaller, attainable steps.
- Celebrate small wins, pause to notice when something works out, even in small ways.
- Co-create multiple pathways so there's more than one way forward.
- Offer choices to restore a sense of control.
- Show up consistently. Predictability builds trust and agency.
- Encourage achievement goals (pursuing what's wanted) instead of only avoidant goals (avoiding failure).



CONSIDERATIONS



- How might trauma be shaping the way families approach goals?
- Am I shifting from deficit-based thinking to strengths-based thinking?
- Do I provide real choices, or are they limited options?
- Where could I celebrate progress more often in my role?
- Listen for hopelessness and help reframe by pointing out areas of hope, even small wins.
- For families who have only known trauma, hope may feel unfamiliar. It's important to meet people where they are and set expectations they can meet.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Hope Rising Oklahoma [RESOURCES](#)
- Harvard Center on the Developing Child – Building Core Capabilities [WEBSITE](#)
- Chan Hellman & Casey Gwinn – Hope Rising: How the Science of Hope Can Change Your Life [BOOK](#)
- Positive Childhood Experiences- [SCALE](#)



ABOUT THE HOPE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

The Hope Community of Practice is a learning space for professionals and lived experts exploring how the [Science of Hope](#) can strengthen systems, practices, and communities.

We meet monthly with rotating topics and speakers.



Learn more and register to join at:

<https://fyjp.org/hope-science>



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This resource was co-created by the Hope Community of Practice.