

# Liberating Ourselves to Find Hope and Healing

By Jessica Isom, MD, MPH

## Understanding the science of hope is a journey toward freeing ourselves from moments of despair and helplessness.

As a young person of color, I benefited from this understanding of hope at each phase of my personal and professional journey. In [my first article](#) about the science of hope, I shared that the first step you can take is accepting that hope is more than wishful thinking. Hope can help you see beyond the here and now and instead see the possibility of a brighter future. This vision of the future can actually motivate you to shape it.

Hope can lift our spirits and free our minds to help us set goals, identify pathways to pursue them, and take steps that can profoundly impact our lives and the lives of others. Coupled with an understanding of oppression and how it impacts our daily lives, hope-raising skills can support increased psychological resilience and emotional well-being.

## 3 practices will help you create and benefit from hope as a tool for liberation

### 1. Explore liberation practices as a starting point

Traditional approaches to managing everyday stressors or mental health challenges often overlook the deep impact of societal, cultural, and political forces on our well-being. To nourish myself and keep moving forward in the face of adversity, I've turned to liberatory practices, like Freedom Dreaming, creativity, self-care, and social action, designed for individuals and communities of color.

Liberation can shine a light on your path toward finding support for your mental health and well-being. I've seen how learning to apply principles of liberation has inspired me at home and at work to set meaningful goals, find the right route forward, and tap into the motivation I need to take action.

By embracing a more holistic understanding of the human experience, self-exploration through a liberatory lens can protect young people of color from societal pressures and cultural stereotypes that seek to limit us.

Take a few minutes to try this guided exercise that can help you think through ways to [cultivate hope for healing](#). This exercise shares a broader context of our struggles as young people of color and helps us see the collective nature of our resilience. Exercises like these allow us to explore ways to both heal from and cope with adversity by recognizing the power of hope and healing in community and the importance of addressing the systems that shape our experiences.



## 2. Nurture Freedom Dreams

Coined by Robin D.G. Kelley, a prominent scholar and historian, **Freedom Dreaming** encourages us to envision a future free from societal constraints and oppressive forces. It involves self-exploration, imagining possibilities, and setting clear goals aligned with our deepest aspirations. Freedom Dreaming can help us rise above limitations imposed by structural oppression and navigate mental health and emotional well-being challenges with hope and resilience.

### Freedom Dreaming can support us to:

- + Consider the impact of identity-based oppression on our goals and aspirations.
- + Acknowledge the daily experiences of discrimination and their effects on mental health and emotional well-being.
- + Use imagination as a tool to cultivate inner strength, direction and resilience.

[Try a Freedom Dreaming writing exercise >](#)

## 3. Intentionally raise hope in your daily life

Cultivating hope skills supports your sense of hope and action by shifting your daily focus to achievable goals, flexible pathways, and a sense of personal agency. Three exercises can help you cultivate hope and take action to support your mental health and emotional well-being.

- + [Cultivate hope for healing.](#)
- + Use this coloring [sheet as a meditation on hope](#)

## The Takeaway

Making a daily effort to explore liberation practices, nurture freedom dreams and learn hope-raising skills spawns optimism, awareness and growth. Hope can free you from fear and helplessness and motivate you to pursue your dreams one step at a time.

You can do it! As you practice cultivating hope each day, you can use hope to help get through hard times, create opportunities and trust in your process of growth. Join me in learning more about the [science of hope!](#)

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### About My Digital Sanctuary

My Digital Sanctuary brings information and creativity together to support soul care, a holistic approach to emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being from the Steve Fund. Created by mental health experts who specialize in serving young people of color and their families, My Digital Sanctuary shares the help, hope, and healing we need to not just survive but to thrive.


# Freedom Dreaming: What Are Your Deepest Dreams and Highest Hopes?

Can you imagine your life or the world free of societal constraints and oppressive forces? What are your dreams and hopes? What possibilities do you see when you look ahead?

To help get started, let's read a poem and do a little writing. Then, try **Freedom Dreaming** and imagine a future where you can live in a world that empowers you to be your true self.

## *I Dream a World*

By Langston Hughes



I dream a world where man  
No other man will scorn,  
Where love will bless the earth  
And peace its paths adorn  
I dream a world where all  
Will know sweet freedom's way,  
Where greed no longer saps the soul  
Nor avarice blights our day.  
A world I dream where black or white,  
Whatever race you be,  
Will share the bounties of the earth  
And every man is free,  
Where wretchedness will hang its head  
And joy, like a pearl,  
Attends the needs of all mankind—  
Of such I dream, my world!

## **Writing Reflection: What do you feel, see and imagine?**

Grab a journal, open a Word doc or find a piece of paper and put down a few words!

- What emotions did you feel as you read the poem?
- What lines or images stood out to you?
- What do you feel when you're confronted with injustice or inequality in the world? Do you feel frustrated, angry or hopeless? How do you work through your feelings?
- Of the ways you work through your emotions, which do you feel support your mental health and well-being? Which do you feel might be damaging to your mental health and well-being?

## **What's Next?**

Trying writing your own poetry, reflection of journal entries that express how you feel, what you're thinking about, and what steps you can take next on your mental health journey.



# Freedom Dreaming: What Do You See When You Dream About the Future?

By Jessica Isom, MD, MPH

**Freedom Dreaming is a tool for survival that has been used for centuries by people of color to create space to exist despite societal constraints faced in their daily lives. While Freedom Dreaming can be used to imagine a future without societal constraints and oppressive forces, it can also be used each day to support our mental health and emotional well-being.**

As we take time to look to a hopeful future, a space can open between our reflections and actions that can help us find hope and healing. The small but mighty choices we can make each day can help us explore who we truly are, see new possibilities for ourselves and others, and set daily goals aligned with our deepest hopes.

As a young person of color, my daily freedom dreams started with choosing vibrant, bold clothing. This choice was an extension of my desire to bring as much light into daily life as possible while also expressing my personal style. I also made the conscious decision to take a slow walk every day, even if for just a few minutes. I would make an effort to pause to admire and touch the leaves on trees or to notice the blueness of the sky or the sounds of nature around me.



After intense periods of productivity, I learned to let myself rest without the pressure to be productive. In moments where I felt I wasn't reaching my goals, I chose to seek laughter and joy in my favorite television shows and to use this joy as fuel to keep my engine going. In these small, intentional daily choices, I was able to create moments of liberation from unrealistic societal pressures, affirming that I deserve to exist as I am in these moments.

I believe you can reap the benefits of daily Freedom Dreaming for your mental health and emotional well-being as well.



Here are a few reflection questions and examples to help you get started:

**1. Your Current Freedom Dreams: What are your Freedom Dreams today?**

- What small acts of care or joy have you practiced today that resist the demands of dominant culture?
- How have you allowed yourself to embrace ease and pleasure in your daily life recently?
- When did you last make a decision that put your well-being and desires above societal expectations?

**2. Exploring New Freedom Dreams: Could you explore new Freedom Dreams?**

- What boundaries or norms imposed by dominant culture would you like to challenge within the next 24 hours?
- How can you practice generosity or connection with others in a way that defies societal expectations?
- What would you do differently if you gave yourself permission to rest without guilt?

**3. Nurturing Acts of Pleasure and Joy: How do you nurture joy?**

- What do you find joy in that the dominant culture dismisses as unproductive or frivolous?
- What forms of self-expression feel liberating to you, and how can you amplify them in your daily life?
- What acts of care do you desire to give or receive that honor your identity and needs?

**4. Seeking Support: How do you find support and resources?**

- Is there a friend or trusted adult you can talk with about your dreams?
- What resources, information or inspiration do you need to prepare for action?
- Are there people with similar interests with whom you can collaborate?

**5. Taking Action: How do you take action, reflect and try again?**

- With your freedom dream in mind, what small steps could you take today toward your dream?
- Are there neighborhood or local initiatives, activities or volunteering where you can make a difference?

**6. Reflect & Adjust.**

- Ask yourself what's working. What challenges have you faced? How do you reflect on your efforts and learning – and try again? How would you refine your approach?

**Examples of Freedom Dreaming actions**

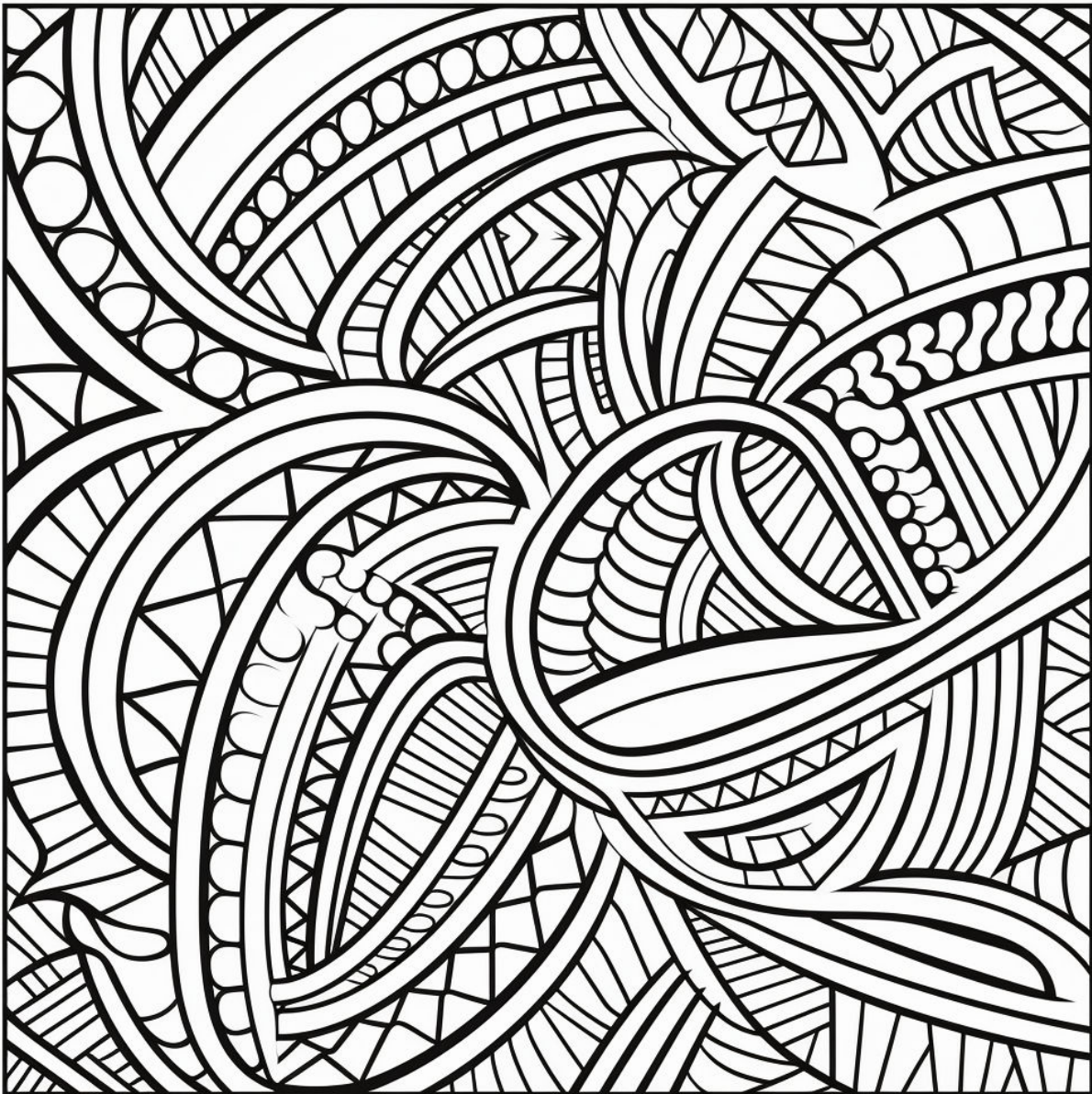
- Take care of your mental health and emotional well-being
- Reclaim your personal style
- Connect with nature in daily life
- Make generosity a daily commitment
- Indulge in intentional rest
- Express love of self, affirm your strengths
- Offer encouragement and joy to others
- Engage with issues you care about online and in-person
- Offer and receive care without shame or guilt from others



# The Color of Hope

Sometimes it's helpful to slow our minds down by doing simple crafts and creative work. Let's use this "grown-up" coloring sheet to meditate on hope.

Hope is more than just wishful thinking. Hope is a belief in the possibility of a brighter future and an understanding of our own ability to shape it. As you color, consider meditating on how hope gives you strength and can help you find a pathway forward in life.





# Cultivating Hope Skills for Healing and Well-being

By Jessica Isom, MD, MPH

**Learning to “raise” hope in our lives is something each of us can do. With guidance, intentionality, and patience, you can find support to cultivate hope as part of your mental health and well-being journey.**

Studies have shown that learning to raise hope can support you as an individual, and as a member of your community, to cope in daily life and arm you with tools to maintain hope – even in tough times. Remember, hope-raising skills enable you to maintain a sense of optimism and possibility by shifting your daily focus to:

- Achievable goals
- Flexible pathways to reach your goals
- Your ability to take action and gain strength each day



## **An example: Working through adversity with hope**

Have you thought about the difference between coping and healing through adversity – and how hope plays a central role? The differences between the two can be illustrated with the following example:

*Imagine you’ve been struggling with feeling isolated at work or school due to microaggressions. Coping might look like getting through the day by distracting yourself or avoiding interactions that feel*

*harmful. While this helps you to survive, it doesn’t address the deeper painful toll this experience may have on you.*

*Healing, on the other hand, uses hope to move forward toward thriving. You may set an intention to join a supportive group that understands your experiences (goal), consider different ways to connect with them in the workplace or instead build community in a digital space (pathways), and remind yourself that you have the power and wisdom to seek environments that affirm your identity and your well-being (agency).*

## **Three Skills to Go from Coping to Thriving**

These three hope-raising skills can transform your approach from just getting by to actively seeking healing and growth. This helps you reap the benefits of committing to your mental health and emotional well-being. This approach is sometimes described as radical healing and draws upon the science of hope in powerful ways. Select one or more to add to your personal toolbox for raising hope in daily life.



- 1. Create goals** to help you achieve clarity and purpose, which cultivates hope levels in your life.
  - a. **Set Small, Achievable Goals:** Focus on a few short-term, manageable mini-goals to build up a sense of accomplishment and reinforce your hope level.
  - b. **Visualize Future Success:** Use visualization techniques to imagine a positive outcome related to your goal, as this can reinforce a sense of hope rooted in a clear direction.
  - c. **Develop a Hope Plan:** Write a plan with clear steps toward achieving your personal goal, ensuring it feels connected to a larger purpose.
  
- 2. Identify pathways** to help maintain the flexibility you need in your daily life and increase your problem-solving skills.
  - a. **Identify Alternative Pathways:** Practice brainstorming different ways to reach a goal when the original path is blocked. Engaging in this in advance may shorten the time needed and reduce the stress impacts of a pathway not being successful.
  - b. **Reframe Challenges:** Intentionally view obstacles as opportunities to grow, learn, and strengthen resilience rather than seeing them as setbacks.
  - c. **Engage in Reflective Writing:** Write about the paths you have already taken and how they have led to your growth; this can reinforce your belief in the possibility of new ways forward.
  
- 3. Take action** and know that you have agency to support your sense of personal empowerment and raise your confidence in being able to exert control over areas of your life.
  - a. **Create a Personal Mantra:** Develop a culturally resonant mantra or affirmation that reminds you of your strength, power and internal wisdom to navigate challenges.
  - b. **Celebrate Small Wins:** Acknowledge even the smallest steps forward to offer yourself proof of your agency and capabilities.
  - c. **Explore Self-Compassion Practices:** Self-compassion is a tool for being kind and loving towards yourself in the midst of setbacks. It supports your moving forward towards existing or new goals and pathways.



### Ready to try it?

Grab a pen and paper (or your phone or laptop) and make a plan to cultivate hope each day. Set goals, identify the routes to your goals and then take action. Remember, making progress in our lives and on our mental health journeys takes time. But, by acting, reflecting, and trying again, we can find the help, hope, and healing we need to thrive.