



The protective power of hope and thought

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I lay in a dwindling pool of candlelight, listening to the shouting, rowing neighbours and occasional gunshots that are all part of the noisy clamour of Gaza's poorer neighbourhoods. I felt very, very far from home, trapped, and aghast at how dire my situation was.

Last year I, and millions of others, watched the inspiring BBC Panorama documentary about journalist [Alan Johnston's](#) capture, ordeal and eventual release in Gaza.

Alan's story made compelling viewing. Awestruck by this intelligent, dignified and modest man, I saw how his story highlights how, no matter how bleak our personal circumstances, the biggest battle we face in desperate times is not the outer one, but the inner one.

A review of our [basic needs](#) reveals that a sense of inner hope, meaning and control in our lives is essential for emotional and physical wellbeing. But how can someone who has been abducted and incarcerated ever have any control?

Johnston's abduction and one hundred and fourteen days of imprisonment indeed stripped him of physical liberty; but in making certain decisions he managed to take control of some aspects of his daily life and regain some independence of mind.

Alan Johnston: taking the first steps to regain control

Alan told us that the time in his cell passed at a crushingly slow pace. Hour after long hour he paced the small room, and after a few days he became ill from the food and contaminated water. But he managed to persuade his captives to agree to give him chips and boiled water in the future, thus lessening the likelihood that he would be weakened by food poisoning again.

I told myself that in my captivity there was only one thing that I might be able to control - my state of mind. But much of my mental energy went into the huge effort to confront my many anxieties, the struggle, as I saw it, to keep my mind in the right place.

Rehearsing the worst: influencing his future reactions

On one occasion his captors said he would be executed by having his throat cut and that this would be filmed and broadcast. It's hard to imagine the impact of such a threat. But even in the face of that terror Johnston still made up his mind that, if this video was going to be the last image his beloved parents and sister would see of him, he wanted to ensure that it was 'not of a weeping, pleading, broken man'.

So he rehearsed his death in his mind, hoping that if it should become reality he would retain his dignity and some inner control on how he faced that moment.

Victor Frankl – more than a victim

Alan Johnston was not the first person in captivity to recognize the need to take some control, to feel that they are more than just the product of the limiting environmental circumstances. Viktor Frankl, in his book [Man's Search for Meaning](#), said that his experience in the

concentration camps demonstrates that there is always a choice of action, and no one is just a reflection of the surroundings.

Frankl believed that no one can take away a human being's freedom to decide, to *choose* their attitude and behaviour. So even in the camps, despite an uncertain future, starvation, lack of sleep, disease and mental torment, what a person became was down to their inner decisions.

Compassion in the camps: the power to choose

Frankl remembers seeing daily acts of heroism and compassion, starving men giving their bread to another, and comforting the dying. The struggle to maintain dignity and not act in a primitive way was a huge battle – and one that many understandably lost. Those prisoners who gave up hope of better times, or resigned themselves to total disempowerment, soon melted into apathy and despondency. For most this was the ultimate death sentence. They took to their beds until they died, lying in their own mess, and no threat or encouragement could shift them.

Hope – a matter of life and death

Frankl recounts his own moment of epiphany, when, subsumed by the pain of his blistered feet and anxiety ridden thoughts, he became disgusted at the endless stream of worrying trivia infecting his mind. So he deliberately changed the content of his thoughts, and imagined himself on a platform, giving a lecture in a pleasant, warm and well-lit hall. This was when he started to rise above the misery, regain hope and begin to forge a barrier against mental and physical decay.

The all-consuming pain of the moment and the seeming impossibility of improvement can eat away at the very roots of the human spirit. But finding a sense of hope and a degree of control over your thoughts appears to generate feelings that act as a genuine barrier against descending into apathy.

The immune system seems to recognize this deadly moment too. In the camps there was an unexpected rise in the number of deaths of prisoners between Christmas 1944 and New Year 1945. The conditions in the camp had not changed – but prisoners who had been sustained by the belief and hope that they would be home for Christmas could not cope with the reality now facing them, and succumbed.

A psychological life raft

Alan Johnston set out to find a way to survive through the torment, the uncertain future and the constant threat to life. His own words give the best description of his determination to retain control of his emotional state:

And in my prison, I felt that I needed some kind of mental lifeboat, to help me cross the great ocean of time that lay before me, aiming for that almost unimaginable moment far beyond my horizon when I might somehow go free.

And so I took all the positive thoughts I could muster and lashed them together in my mind, like planks in a psychological raft that I hoped would buoy me up. And in some ways it did. It was one of several mental devices, or tricks, or props, that helped me get through.

In this way, I fought what was the psychological battle of my life. God knows, it was hard, and lonely, and there were many dark passages when I edged close to despair.

But I was always in the fight, and there was no collapse.

Everyday choices can make us less emotional and physically stronger

Mercifully, few of us will experience a time that will test our mental endurance to such a degree. But even in ordinary life, any choice that orientates your inner thoughts towards hope and possibility can make you feel happier and physically stronger.

Worry and fear have a seductive pull on our mental and physical processes. These responses are controlled by the 'oldest' part of the brain that cannot tell the difference between a real or imagined threat. You can feel overwhelmed by anxiety just by *thinking* about a negative event that may or may not happen.

Mind what you say! Your body will hear every word

When you take note of your inner dialogue, you can begin to limit damaging self-talk. When you reconnect with hopeful thoughts, recognize and list the reasons for forging on through a difficult time, or simply *decide* not to get in a state, you can instantly feel calmer.

Even if you are just stuck in traffic and pushed for time, you have a choice. There is no escape from the situation. You can go through it feeling fraught and strained, with all of the inevitable consequences for your physiological systems. Or you can decide to hope for the best, choose to enjoy the moment by listening to the radio, and relax as your digestion, your immune system and your cardiovascular processes work to their best. Whatever happens afterwards, you will be in better shape to handle it.

And all of us, all the time, can thank our lucky stars that we don't find ourselves in similar circumstances to Alan Johnston.