

‘Hope is Informed Optimism’

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Recognizing your mindset—and realizing there are ways to shift it—are keys to the road to recovery.

"To me, hope is informed optimism"

—Michael J. Fox

I've worked with IC patients for over ten years, and of all the factors that go into healing, I've found that hope is critical for success. At my clinic, PelvicSanity, we even track how hopeful patients feel after their initial evaluation.

When I ran across Michael J. Fox's quote defining hope as "informed optimism," I was struck by how empowering it can be for patients. It's particularly meaningful coming from an actor who has personally struggled with a chronic disease. For me, the best part about this quote is that it reminds us that hope is not something we either have or we don't. It can be cultivated, or it can be lost.

This quote is also a great way to think about other perspectives that can be roadblocks to recovery. Each of these alternatives to Fox's "informed optimism" can hold us back from healing in different ways.

Alternatives to Informed Optimism

To unpack Fox's quote, you can either be informed or uninformed about your condition, and you can either have an optimistic or pessimistic outlook. That gives four different categories for how you respond to either an IC diagnosis or the ups and downs of your IC journey.

We'll look at each of these categories in more detail below.

	Optimism	Pessimism
Informed	Hope	Discouragement
Uninformed	Wishful Thinking	Catastrophizing

Hope is Informed Optimism

Hope: a feeling of expectation and desire for a certain thing to happen.

Informed optimism is powerful. You face the challenges of IC head-on, maintaining a positive attitude even while acknowledging the road to recovery may be difficult. This hopeful response gives you the strength to keep going through adversity and continue to do the things you know will benefit your health, even if you aren't seeing the immediate benefit. Of course there will still be bad days, but hope helps to keep a sense of perspective—the journey may not be smooth, but you're still progressing to where you want to be.

Wishful Thinking is Uninformed Optimism

Wishful thinking: The formation of beliefs and making decisions according to what might be pleasing to imagine instead of by appealing to evidence, rationality, or reality.

While wishful thinkers do a good job of staying positive, they are not informed about their condition and often have unrealistic expectations. In fact, many times the medical community encourages this kind of approach! We're told, "take this pill and you'll be fine" or "it's just a simple surgery and you'll be back to normal." With IC, it's rarely that simple. No doctor, surgeon, acupuncturist, physical therapist, or other professional can walk your healing journey for you. Wishful thinkers eventually become let down when they don't see immediate positive benefits from the procedure or pill they were sure was going to help.

The Challenge: If you're a wishful thinker, keep that positivity! It can sustain you through the ups and downs of recovery, and motivate you to keep going. Just try and temper that optimism with knowledge about your condition. Knowledge is power and can help explain the bumps in the road that can be so frustrating. Often it takes a holistic, long-term approach to see the results you want, but you certainly can reach the light at the end of the tunnel.

Discouragement is Informed Pessimism

Discouragement: A loss of confidence or enthusiasm, dispiritedness.

There's another group of IC patients who are highly informed about their condition but are pessimistic about their recovery. While it is natural to feel disappointment as you go through the trial-and-error process of IC treatments, letting it lead to discouragement can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Being discouraged can be completely natural, especially when you haven't found a great medical team to help offer hope and a road to recovery. But dispiritedness makes it difficult to do the right things for your health and can lead to the (incorrect) conclusion you can't get better.

Too often, information about IC can be overwhelming, making it difficult to prioritize the right things for your health. It can even cause paralysis—with so many potential options for treatment out there, which ones do you pick? It can be hard to simply take that first step.

The Challenge: Take advantage of the knowledge that you have about the condition. It's hard-earned and a valuable tool on your road to recovery. But also realize that many people live healthy, happy lives with IC and be willing to fight to be in that group. Don't let the negativity of outsiders affect you. For example, you may want to stay

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away from any online groups or influences that tend to bring you down and just focus on your own recovery. Ask your spouse, friends, or others in your life to help you remain positive during the dark days.

Catastrophizing is Uninformed Pessimism

Catastrophizing: An irrational thought a lot of us have in believing that something is far worse than it actually is.

Many patients start their journey in this category—they don't yet know much about their condition, and they have been told just enough to be scared and feel hopeless about their chances for recovery. The result can be catastrophizing, where your mind starts a downward spiral thinking of all the worst things that can happen. Recovery may seem completely out of reach. But knowledge really is power, and knowing that many other people have been in your shoes and recovered to live healthy lives can be transformative.

The Challenge: Take little steps towards understanding your condition and reminding yourself that many people with IC recover. Learn more about IC—ICA's online resources can be a great tool—or begin to read more about the condition. Choose your sources carefully and stick with those that are evidence-based, accurate, and practical, from acknowledged experts in the field. Meditation, yoga, or gentle exercise can help you stay grounded in the moment and not let negative thoughts spiral into catastrophizing. Focus on reliable information from specialists in the field and push yourself to take a step — even a small one — in a positive, informed, direction.

Recognize Your Mindset

Wherever you are in your journey, it can be helpful to recognize your own mindset and gradually work your way to informed optimism. That may entail cultivating a more hopeful attitude by reading success stories and reminding yourself that many people with your condition improve. Or it may involve learning more about the condition from reliable sources. At the ICA, we strive to provide the knowledge and resources to help patients be informed, as well as the community and support to help them remain optimistic.

And don't be discouraged by setbacks in your mindset. It's natural for your mood and outlook to fluctuate throughout your journey, but taking little steps towards hope can pay big dividends.