

“A practical and inspirational whole-self guide to getting your life back!”

– Deanna Minich, PhD

Hope

in a

Dark Tunnel

Your
roadmap to
well-being

when
navigating
chronic
illness

Bev Roberts

Resounding early praise for Hope in a Dark Tunnel

Your roadmap to well-being when navigating chronic illness

By Bev Roberts

“A practical and inspirational whole-self guide to getting your life back!”

~ Deanna Minich, PhD, *author of The Rainbow Diet*

“Masterfully structured, ‘Hope in a Dark Tunnel’ provides just that and then some. Bev Roberts speaks from, and to, the heart in chronicling her trying journey through the shadows of chronic illness so that others might be saved unnecessary pain. It’s a must-read and matchless reference companion for anyone in, or connected to, that struggle.”

~ Dr. Bridget Cooper, *bestselling author of Pain Rebel
and Little Landslides*

I would like to congratulate Bev Roberts with writing her book *Hope in a Dark Tunnel*. It is a story about a real person going through a real life challenge. Stories like this are always powerful in giving others hope and a resolve to face their own problems. But this book gives the reader more than hope, it outlines a path to follow. A path leading to not only to recovery from physical illness, but to dealing with life’s challenges as a whole. I warmly recommend it!

~ Dr Natasha Campbell-McBride, MD, *bestselling
author of Gut and Psychology Syndrome*

This book is intended to supplement, not replace, the advice of a trained health professional. The material is for general information and the purpose of educating individuals. Should you have any health-related questions, please consult with your doctor or other trained health professional before embarking on a new treatment, diet or exercise program. The author specifically disclaims any liability, loss, or risk, personal or otherwise, that is incurred as a consequence, directly or indirectly, of the use and application of any of the contents of this book.

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In other words, please do the right thing

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For Alexis and Evelyn
You are the bright rainbow in any cloud

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Introduction

Resilience isn't developed by distraction from unwanted feelings, but by realising that you can only thrive when you travel through the pain of life's challenges.
Jarl Forsman and Steve Sekhon

Are you facing a chronic health challenge and have conflicting, or just too much or information on how to improve but still aren't sure where to begin?

I share the information in this book with you because I don't want you to have to go through what I went through; the merry-go-round of tests, doctors and the general feelings of doubt and invisibility.

This book enables you to appreciate how much progress you can make in managing your well-being and helps you recognise the opportunities that are available to you.

You will feel understood and supported to take back your personal power by

- **Getting back to basics:** Nurture yourself with goodness by eating well, sleeping well, moving more and increasing your self-care;
- **Managing your mindset:** Clean up your self-talk, focus on what you can do, show gratitude for simple pleasures and use realistic ways of measuring progress; and
- **Gaining knowledge:** Explore your chronic health challenges with an open mind and examine treatment options available while factoring in your own needs.

I want to ensure that you don't feel alone on the journey back to well-being and do not need to be defined by your chronic illness. We'll get to the heart of the matter by

- Recognising what you need to do to support yourself physically, mentally, emotionally and soulfully,
- Nourishing your body, mind and soul with consistency not perfection, learning to trust yourself along the way,
- Raising your awareness about the way relationships change when you get sick,
- Understanding why it's important to surround yourself with supportive people, and
- Acknowledging why it's equally important to pull back from non-supportive people.

Throughout the book you will find I use the hyphenated word 'well-being' as if they were two words. This is intentional because we will not only be exploring how you can take back your personal power and be resilient, but how you can truly become a well being.

This is not to dismiss that you are experiencing chronic health challenges or an invisible chronic illness. However, I do want to highlight that your physical, mental, emotional and soulful aspects are integrated, and it is important that you are able to take all these aspects into account so that you can see yourself as a well being.

I have also purposely chosen to use the word 'need' throughout the book. I am making a distinction between

Need: something you must have, and

Want: something you would like to have.

I know how easy it is to go into victim mode. It can feel as if it's easier to take the path of least resistance when you're dealing with a debilitating chronic health challenge that's difficult to diagnose or treat. For myself, doing that initially cost me many expensive tests and ineffective treatments, plus a lot of uncertainty and pain.

I'm certain that it's worth putting in the effort to become your own well-being champion and advocate. I know, as well as anyone, how difficult it can be to get out of our comfort zones, but I wouldn't go back to that feeling of helplessness and disempowerment either. My journey has me living more fabulously each new day, and that's my wish for you.

And if you are a carer or health professional, I want to help you gain a better understanding of how an invisible chronic illness feels from the patient's perspective.

My journey here

Our journey through life is short. The wise know that even though we can't control events or how long we're here, we do get to choose how we interpret what happens.
Jarl Forsman and Steve Sekhon

I have a strong work ethic and used to work hard and play hard. I was passionate about achieving. As an award-winning and board-certified executive, I worked sixty-plus hour weeks and even in my own consulting business, I worked extended hours.

I was unable to switch off from work. I was constantly pushing myself to do the best I could for my family and for the clients and colleagues I worked with.

I did not place a priority on myself or my capacity to take time out. I was a human doing – not a human being – and it took a great toll on my health, well-being and my relationships. Quite simply, it sucked the joy out of my life.

Working so hard ensured I was out of touch with my body and my emotions, I didn't have time to take stock of myself. The many physical symptoms (joint pain, rashes, ice-pick headaches) I began to experience seemed unrelated, so I put up with them and soldiered on for six months.

The worst of the symptoms (poor memory recall, inability to make decisions, lack of focus) were not related to my physical body but to the chronic fatigue, brain fog and the impaired way that my brain was functioning.

I finally realised that I was more than *just* exhausted. However, it took me a long time to accept that I was extremely ill.

Losing my mind

I found myself forgetting essential information on a regular basis. I forgot the names of people I worked with. I would stare at objects in my home and not know what to call them. There were times when I had wanted to say something, but the words would not come out my mouth. It felt as if there was a disconnect between my brain and my speech. I felt so frightened and traumatised by not being able to recall things I knew.

The reckoning point was when my daughter got frustrated with me for repeating the same statement or asking questions over and over within a short timeframe.

I had previously completed a Master's Degree in Behavioural Change and strategy while working full time as an executive. So, I felt distraught when I could not comprehend and interpret what I was reading, not even a paragraph in a women's magazine.

The joy of rest

I made the decision to take a three-month sabbatical. Part of me rationalised that I was burned out and if I were to rest and relax, I would feel my usual bouncy self again.

I chose to go to Italy where they're known for their ability to live the good life, where rest is a part of daily life and Sundays are sacred. My new mantra was "la dolce far niente" - the "sweetness of doing nothing" - a phrase made mainstream by Elizabeth Gilbert in *Eat, Pray, Love*. I was going to learn the art of living.

I lived like a local, got fresh produce from the markets and created a slow, gentle rhythm to each day. In southern Italy I learned to relish a 'siesta', as between 2pm and 5pm nothing is open, so it was

completely acceptable to rest, and I knew I wouldn't miss out on anything. I continued this approach as I travelled into France.

By sleeping a lot, nurturing myself with whole, nutritious food, gentle walking and lots of rest, I began to feel a bit better, which reinforced my belief that my impairments were *just* caused by exhaustion.

Back to reality

After a conversation with a girlfriend in the United Kingdom, I realised that I was not ready to return to Australia. She invited me to stay in the Kent countryside, where I spent a month slowly re-integrating into daily life with her young family, while still taking life at a snail's pace.

On my return I felt optimistic. I recall going into my functional medicine doctor's office when I got back from my sabbatical saying how much better I felt compared to four months prior. Unfortunately, it was transitory.

A colleague of mine and I worked together for two days as co-facilitators and I was unable to get out of bed for a few days afterwards.

I also went back to my personal trainer to resume my exercise routine, but the exertion made me so fatigued that my 'siesta' started as early as 10am and often repeated during the day.

A welcome input

It had been ten months since I'd gotten so ill and it was clear to me in those first couple of weeks back from travelling that things were not as they needed to be with my health and well-being.

I had taken four months off and yet two months later I was still not in the space to be able to seek consulting work. I couldn't continue with the status quo and I couldn't sustain the cost base I had with my savings.

I didn't know where to turn. I was self-employed so couldn't get support from an organisation. I contacted my financial broker and asked if I had any insurance that would help in the short-term. He confirmed that I did have income protection cover and that I was eligible to claim it. This was a real turning point in my journey. I have never had to be so resilient and stand so firmly in my truth as I did in the negative experiences that were to come.

Unexpected responses

As you may not know me, I will share that I am highly principled and hold myself accountable to my inner compass. I am known for my integrity and trustworthiness in business and personal interactions.

However, in their independent medical evaluations for the insurer, I was painted by a rheumatologist and a forensic psychiatrist as a post-menopausal, overweight hypochondriac who was feigning illness.

The pain of not being believed was immense and added more stress to an already distressing situation. I felt the weight of hopelessness bear down on me. It felt as if I was in a dark tunnel without any hope of getting the support I needed; there was no light at the end, or anywhere else I could see. I felt completely overwhelmed.

A neuropsychological independent medical evaluation was then requested to establish whether I was feigning / exaggerating symptoms or whether I was suffering from a genuine disorder.

During the assessment, the neuro-psychologist kept asking if I wanted to return another day as it took me six hours instead of her estimated three hours to complete the cognitive function tests.

I wanted to give up many times during those six hours. I kept taking breaks outside in the fresh air and thinking about the imminent birth of my first granddaughter kept me going.

The report of my results noted the presence of cortical dysfunction (i.e. there does appear to be an illness present - it's just unclear what this happens to be). And I have to say, the relief I felt was indescribable. I was no longer perceived as a malingerer and hypochondriac.

It was only after this report that I was assigned to a support team, nine months after lodging my claim. I am so grateful to the psychologist assigned to my case. She gave me encouragement and created several opportunities for remediation and support.

However, as I was starting to feel supported by the insurer, I began facing challenges from an unexpected quarter of my life. Some of my family and friends didn't seem to understand or accept that I was ill.

Perhaps this was because most of my life I'd been the 'strong one' or the one people said would never retire because I was too busy all the time.

It was incredibly hurtful, and I felt so unsupported. I began to question and doubt myself again. I know the mind and body have a strong connection. However, I knew that this wasn't about my mental health. I knew I was dealing with something more.

What I came to realise is that if you have no diagnosis or an invisible chronic illness, it can be hard for people to understand where you're at. People are often misinformed about illnesses that they can't see physical manifestations of, such as chronic fatigue syndrome or fibromyalgia.

In time I learned to have compassion for their position. I realised that it was more about them and their perspective than about their response being a personal affront towards me.

My functional medicine doctor suggested that when people asked me how I was, I didn't give them any information about the state of my health. Instead, I would say that I was taking small steps in the right direction and leave it at that. It certainly helped.

Surrendering to what was

After one of the many very expensive tests, the results were clear that biotoxin illness was a contributing factor. Dr Ritchie Shoemaker describes biotoxin illness as "an acute and chronic, systemic inflammatory response syndrome acquired following exposure to the interior environment of a water-damaged building". The apartment I was living in had been gutted by fire and refurbished before I moved in. When the practitioner reviewed my results, her recommendation was to move out of my apartment immediately.

I felt so overwhelmed because I had nowhere to go that had no visible mould, carpets or curtains. When I shared this with two of my girlfriends they amazingly offered for me to stay with them.

It was a big step for me to surrender to what my reality was and to accept help from other people. I will be forever grateful for those two girlfriends, who took me in unconditionally and supported me in the next steps of my journey.

Retraining my brain

As an accredited change manager master, I have a deep interest in neuroscience and the plasticity of the brain. I've been a lifelong student and I love learning, so this seemed a natural way to rebuild my brain and recreate neural pathways for things that I'd taken for granted but had lost along the way.

I explored some learning opportunities to help myself, and others, and I quickly realised that this might also help me build an income stream. As I'd spent more than twenty-five years in corporate mentoring and coaching people, the best fit for me was to retrain as a well-being coach.

I found a course that I was able to take that supported learning by repetition, it gave small chunks of information at a time and I could listen to video lectures at my own pace. Being able to take notes by hand supported the creation of new neural pathways for my brain.

Having an accountability buddy in my peer group to discuss content with and make meaning of was invaluable. I am proud to say that I passed each assessment and in twelve months I gained my certification as an integrative and holistic well-being coach.

Life is different

It's taken time, but I've learned to ask for help from people when I need it. I was genuinely surprised at how willing people are to help when you ask. It's not something I had done before as I'd been so self-reliant.

My busy social life was completely impacted by my chronic illness because I no longer had the 'get up and go' to get up and play. If it weren't for some good friends, I would have been isolated.

They were remarkable. They met me where I was and with what I was capable of doing, even if it only meant a short phone call to chat or a shared lunch at home.

Beyond my control

One of the biggest lessons I've learned on this journey has been that I don't need to control everything in my life. Previously, I had been over scheduled, overly busy, with very little time for spontaneity and time to be me. I've come to realise that life is lived moment by moment.

I read once that most people are never fully present in the here and now because unconsciously they believe that the next moment must be more important than this one, but if we do this then we miss our whole life, which is always in the here and now.

I believe that insurance is paid in good faith for those difficult, unexpected events in our lives and yet I have no control over the actions of the income protection insurer. I comply with their requirements, and I continue to rebuild an income stream within my constraints, yet I feel the weight of expectation on me. Given the way I was treated for the first nine months of my claim, I find it distressing when impromptu assessments or case conferences with my doctor are booked.

For this moment

Some of my chronic health challenges persist. However, my well-being has improved over time and this has made writing this book possible.

I had to reconcile the immense grief and loss I felt at no longer being the trusted advisor and respected consultant with a gift for lateral thinking, trouble-shooting and problem solving. I work differently now, and I am at peace with that. For example, I mind-mapped the chapters then dictated this book using speech-to-text over the course of a year.

Even though at times it has been painful and frustrating, this journey has me back in touch with who I really am and how I want to show up. My granddaughters have taught me so much about the value of being curious, playful and in the moment and I'm grateful I have the opportunity to make a difference.

It is for these reasons that I share this roadmap to well-being, so that you too can feel empowered while navigating your own chronic health challenges. Take one step at a time. This is a journey, not a race. Join me and let's live the fab life together.

Begin with the end in mind

The energy between you and the external world is in a constant feedback loop. When you 'live' the feeling you seek, you tune your energy to resonate with the material pieces that match. Imagine it, feel it now and live it.
Jarl Forsman and Steve Sekhon

Overview

I'm sharing this information because if you are struggling, as I was, I know how important it is for you to paint a new picture of your future. The picture that you have right now is probably not working for you, so what have you got to lose?

This is also about taking back your personal power. When you've been sick for a long time you've probably seen a lot of specialists, doctors and practitioners. This can feel incredibly disempowering as you only receive information on a need-to-know basis or decisions may be made that you don't understand.

What you'll find in this chapter are three keys for creating your vision, as well as actions to help you get clear on where you're going and why.

To get the most out of this chapter, take some time out for yourself to reflect on the changes that you need within your body, mind and soul.

Get clear in your own mind - what do you need, don't focus on what others want for you.

You may have tried many things, some of which might have worked to some degree. But no doubt you've lost momentum when they didn't sustain your well-being easily or made you feel deprived. You may feel stuck and in a place where you perceive it's difficult for you to take steps forward in your well-being. You may be locked in to your current state, where you feel hopeless because you've been given a label that is unhelpful to your progress.

Even well-meaning family members and friends have their points of view that can keep us stuck or locked in. Maybe in the past others have determined your next step and now you're ready to give yourself the opportunity to feel that you're in charge of your own life-affirming decisions.

It's important to feel anchored to your future while being in the present. Visualising a future that builds hope deep inside will help you create the space to thrive, not merely survive.

Change approach

When we need to change the direction of our well-being, our starting point is with our patterns, mindset and behaviours. It's important to follow a process and a framework that helps us to reframe ideas, create new stories and let go of our limiting beliefs.

Here is an approach to change that I work with in my coaching practice and in this book.

The first step is to have a clear REASON for the change. Why is this important to you? Why now?

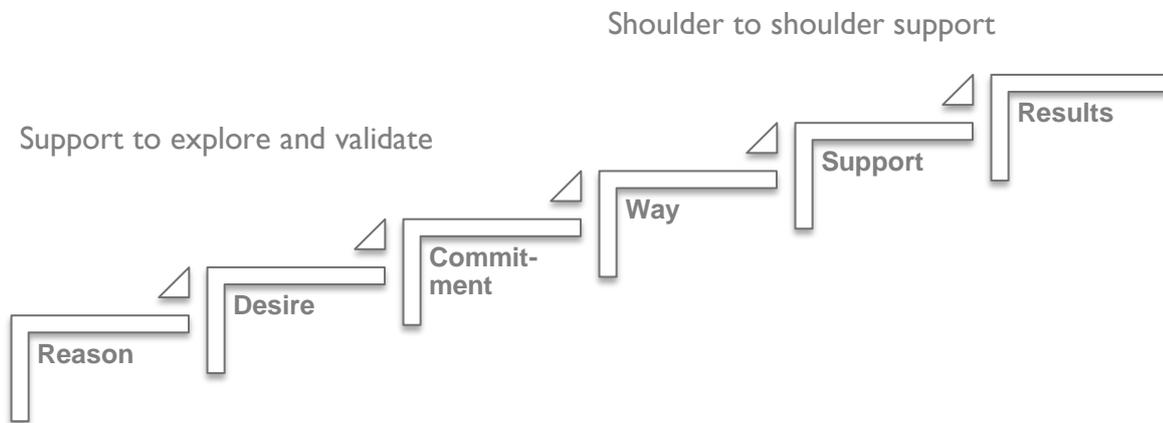
The second step is a powerful DESIRE. What is the purpose of this change? What will the benefits be for you, not only now but for the long term?

The third step is a COMMITMENT. What is your commitment to action that builds momentum over time, rather than doing what is convenient right now?

These first three steps will support you to explore and validate what you need in order to move forward. Once you have these, they enable you to visualise a future.

The fourth step is a WAY. How will you bring your REASON, DESIRE and COMMITMENT into being? What small actionable steps can you take today, next week, next month?

The fifth step is to find the right level of SUPPORT. What type and level of support do you need to take your small actionable steps? We need shoulder-to-shoulder support, and that's where the work of holistic well-being coaches is vital to so many.



In my view, there are three elements of SUPPORT we can't be without:

- Firm loving kindness that helps us be accountable for doing what we say we will do,
- The space to be honest about our struggles and not feel judged, and
- The advocacy of someone who can be our spokesperson and cheerleader, who reminds us of our progress thus far.

These steps will create lasting change and RESULTS.

To keep moving forward, we need consistent, not perfect, action. We are human beings so are fallible, however, inaction keeps us stuck.

Your Intention

An Intention is a future-oriented positive and descriptive set of statements. We use an Intention to harness the neuroplasticity of the brain to support our journey to well-being.

Now the brain does not distinguish between fact and fiction and doesn't distinguish between past, present and future. Medal-winning athletes use this property of visualisation to profound effect. The rehearsal in their mind of an event or race has almost as much impact on their performance as if the practise were actually happening to the brain and body.

Take some time now to set and write down your Intention, which covers your REASON, DESIRE and COMMITMENT, in a way that allows you to really connect with all the things you'd love to do, have, be and feel.

Here are a few examples from my life so you get the idea.

Example 1

My reason for desiring well-being is to create a life that's joyful, filled with opportunity and pleasure.

My desire is to actively participate in my granddaughter's lives **so that** they flourish and truly experience the love I have for them.

My Intention is to have more energy to do what I choose to do and when. I will be playful, curious and spontaneous. I will therefore feel more joyful and happy, with a deeper connection to people in my life.

Example 2

My reason for desiring well-being is so that I can make a difference in the world by being exactly who I am.

My desire is to create an online show, with interviews that build new insights into holistic well-being, so that people are encouraged to make their health and well-being a priority.

My Intention is to have more clarity and focus, so that I can create and think in alignment with my integrity. I will be happy and content in the knowledge that I am making a difference every day by doing what I love. This helps me feel alive, in touch with my emotions and able to express myself healthfully and with grace.

Once you have crafted your Intention, make it visible. This could include creating a graphic to use as a screensaver on your computer or phone or pasting photos of your Intention on your mirror, your refrigerator, or in fact, anywhere you will see it frequently.

Once you have created it, read it out loud as often as you can. It is especially powerful when you do this in front of the mirror. Feel into the emotion of that future to embody it. Really practise what it will feel like to 'live as if' it has already happened.

For help with this activity, head to www.hopeinadarktunnel.com to download your free workbook.

Your future yardstick

When I use traditional success measures - you know the ones I mean... the smart goals: specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound – what I have found is that I start using what I call my driving energy.

What I mean by driving energy is a pure focus on the goal, and attainment of the goal, rather than focusing on my journey to the outcome with ease and grace.

You really do need alternative measures when looking at your future health and well-being when you are coming from a place of being significantly ill.

This is where your Intention is going to be key, because your success measures will be more around how you feel, how you will be, what you will have and what you will do with that new sense of well-being.

I encourage you to make your future yardstick or benchmark based on improvement from the day that you were at your sickest.

Comparing ourselves to who we were before we became ill is not helpful. It creates a greater sense of hopelessness than anything else I've experienced, because there is often grief attached to the loss of who you thought you were.

An alternative is to use your values. When you understand what you value in your life, you will be able to put your attention, intention and focus to move yourself towards that outcome with ease.

Understanding what you value will support you to choose the most appropriate way of working towards the actions you take.

See the chapter sub-section, *A Guiding Framework*, for more detail on values.

Acknowledgements

There are so many people who provided encouragement and support along my journey and I am deeply grateful to each one of you.

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Alexis and Evelyn, you are the light of Gogo's life and bring me so much joy. You have taught me the simplicity of heart-based soulful living through your innocence, curiosity and playfulness.

Denise, Noel and Sharon, you took me in and gave me shelter. Your act of kindness was beyond measure and I am deeply indebted to you.

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Catherine, Leigh and Rose, I marvel at how your calls were so well timed and made me laugh at the world and myself when you called BS on things.

Kathy and Karen, you shaped my thinking and helped me take imperfect action to bring my book to life. Much gratitude to you both.

Ilana I'm truly grateful for the many hours you spent reviewing my first manuscript. I treasure your ongoing support and friendship.

Assisi and Gary, your guidance in editorial have made me feel so proud of this book. Thank you for ensuring my message is clear.

To you the readers of this book I send you this *Ancient Tibetan Buddhist Blessing*

May you all be filled with loving kindness

May you all be well

May you all be peaceful and at ease

May you all be happy

Do you have an invisible chronic illness and are overwhelmed with advice or conflicting information?

Hope in a Dark Tunnel gives you actionable steps to create your path back to well-being and build positivity and hope without false promises.

This book enables you to appreciate how much progress you can make in managing your well-being and helps you recognise the opportunities. You will feel understood and supported to take back and use your personal power to enhance your well-being.

Navigating with this roadmap, you will

- decrease your likelihood of wasting time and incurring unnecessary expenses,
- understand how to deal with medical practitioners and well-meaning friends and family,
- be guided to support yourself physically, mentally, emotionally and soulfully,
- learn to approach the nourishment of your body, mind and soul with consistency, not perfection, and
- learn to trust your inner guidance system.

You are no longer alone in your journey and do not need to be defined by your chronic illness.

www.hopeinadarktunnel.com

BAR CODE to come



Bev Roberts works with business women to transform their well-being by ‘rewiring’ to create healthy habits and lasting change. She is a certified well-being transformation specialist and holds a Master’s Degree in Behavioural Change and Strategy.

Though chronic illness robbed Bev of a successful career as a board-certified executive and accredited master change leadership consultant, she reinvented herself and retrained her brain through her love of learning. Her approach to health and change draws on neuroplasticity and holistically integrates four facets of well-being - physical, mental, emotional and soulful.

Bev is an advocate for those with invisible chronic illnesses, a voice and champion for those needing the critical knowledge and language to change their circumstances despite their current condition. Courageous and vulnerable, Bev insightfully articulates her open-hearted, pragmatic message to empower all who need it.

Bev enjoys a quiet beachside lifestyle and is a Glam-ma to two beautiful granddaughters who help her to stay curious, playful and joyful.