

Discussion & Reflection Guide:

Ode to Hope and Despair (OtHaD)

by Ilana Kovalle

(for Mental Health Book Clubs and Coaching/Therapy Groups)

About the book:

Ode to Hope and Despair is a fully illustrated collection of thematically organized literary and visual art works. The book starts off with black pages and white font, and over the course of the reading, it progresses to black font and white pages, traveling from darkness to light in a literal epitome of an illustrated journey from despair to hope to despair to hope, in a looped circle, which sometimes also manifests as a spiral. After all, what is Despair if not Hope through the looking glass, and what is Hope if not Despair reflected in a funhouse mirror?

About the author:

Ilana Kovalle (nom de plume) is a songwriter, poet, and author, born and raised in rural Kazakhstan and currently residing in Jersey City, NJ. Her songs, including her recent EP album “Stages of Heartbreak,” are available on all platforms (under IlanaKovalle). She is a certified well-being trainer with the Neurointegration Institute and has a positive psychology coaching certification from Positive Acorn, which she proudly leverages to develop well-being and mental health workshops and discussion circles.



Unique offering & objective - Why bring OtHaD to your group?

What if your next group discussion could bypass the overthinking brain and speak straight to the part that actually feels?

Ode to Hope and Despair isn't just a collection of poems and prose—it's an illustrated conversation with the parts of us that don't respond well to direct interrogation. Through metaphors, it sidesteps the intellectualization and defensiveness we can have around big scary feelings and lets people explore them in a new light. And through images, it slips right past the conscious/rational filters and taps into the subconscious—in an emotional shorthand that words alone sometimes can't manage. In a group setting, this means participants can safely interpret and process feelings through the lens of a story, a metaphor, or an image—making the discussion both more personal and less intimidating.

Set-up Options:

1) Good for when only one copy of the book is available (making it more economical) -

a) Bring the book to the meeting preceding the OtHaD discussion, and at the end of the meeting, send the book around the room with a prompt: "Quickly flip/scan through the pages, and whatever image arrests your attention, take a photo of that image and the piece associated with it."

or

b) As the group lead, you can pick a few pieces/images from the book yourself, using your own criteria for the selections, and scan/print to distribute or have participants take photos of those beforehand (at the end of the meeting preceding the OtHaD discussion).

or

c) As the group lead, choose a few pieces where the accompanying illustration enhances or complicates the words (or choose a few pieces from the "despair" side at the beginning of the book and a few from the "hope" side at the end of the book). Project or pass around these pages at the beginning of the planned OtHaD discussion. Allow moments of silence for the participants to settle and absorb before starting the discussion.

2) If more copies of the book are available, each participant can do the suggested prep work on numerous pieces that resonate with them.

Suggested Prep Work for Participants:

(before the actual discussion meeting, if leveraging Set-up Options 1a, 1b, or 2)

1) Find an image in the book that speaks to you but do not read the poem yet. Meditate/reflect on the image alone:

- What calls to you in the image? In what ways does it resonate? What do you think it means?
- What do you think the associated piece of writing going to be about?
- Write a few lines (or a whole poem of your own) as inspired by the image.

2) Read the piece of writing associated with the image:

- What is your first reaction? In what ways is it similar to or different from what you expected based on the image?
- Has your interpretation of the image changed after reading the poem associated with it? Why or why not?

Example Session Structure

Segment	Objective	Time
Tone-Setting & Warm-up	Set tone and emotional safety	10 min
Guided Discussion	Exploration through words and images	30–45 min
Creative Reflection	Integration through journaling or sketching	10–15 min
Closing Integration	Wrapping up with intention	5–10 min

1. Tone-Setting & Warm-up:

Begin with soft grounding (breathwork or 1–2 minutes of silence) or a gentle prompt, such as:

“Let yourself arrive. Leave the day behind and step into the space between hope and despair. The space of quiet courage. Vulnerability with edges softened. Curiosity in the presence of darkness.”

Once grounded, consider “warming-up” with an open question, such as:

“If your emotions had a color palette today, what would it look like?”

2. Guided Discussion (adjust as see fit, based on the selected Set-up Option)

Despair and the Art of Stillness

- Which visual best captured a feeling you couldn't previously name?
- What do you think is happening between the written text and the image in that piece?
- Are there any visuals that made you feel more than the words alone?
- What is your relationship with despair? Why do you think human beings have evolved to feel the emotion of despair? What does it serve?
- How does Ilana describe despair in ways that feel either familiar or new to you?
- What metaphors or imagery around pain or numbness stood out to you?
- How do you personally tend to express or silence your despair?

Text vs. Image: Dialogue or Echo?

- Pick a piece where the image contradicted your expectations from the words (or where the words felt contradictory to the image)—what did that tension do to your interpretation?
- Was there an illustration you felt 'spoke' louder than the writing?
- Where did the image complete the story that the text only started?
- Were there moments that felt like silence speaking louder than words?
- Do you notice spaces in your own life that feel like what's left unsaid in the book?

Mirror Moments

- Pick one visual from the book and describe how it made you feel—not what it shows, but what it stirred.
- Is there a visual that reminded you of a moment in your own life—even if abstractly?
- If one of the illustrated figures could speak, what do you imagine it would say?
- Choose an image and write down what emotion you think it was trying to hold.
- How did the visuals shape your emotional response to the writing?
- If you had to draw a page from your own internal landscape right now, what might it look like?

Hope Reimagined

- What kind of hope does this book gesture toward—naïve, earned, defiant, etc?
- What is your own relationship with hope? What does hope provide for you?
- Is there a difference between the hope you want and the hope you believe in?
- Which piece in the book helped you feel most accompanied or understood?
- Ilana starts and ends the book with the same line of “...when I looked up, the hand that held me was mine...” but uses different visuals to accompany it. What do you think that implies? What is the journey there?

3. Creative Reflection Prompts

These can be used individually or in a closing circle:

- Sketch a visual echo of your current emotional state in the same style—keep it abstract if needed.
- If you were to illustrate a poem about the emotion you hide most, what might that drawing look like?
- Write a brief piece titled What Hope Looks Like When No One's Watching—use the book's tone as inspiration.
- Choose a character or figure from the book and write a short internal monologue from their point of view.
- Write a note to the part of you most afraid of being seen—borrow the book's tone— gentle, brave, unflinching.

4. Closing Integration

- ◆ Invite a quiet or spoken reflection (when time allows):
 - Which image, line, or silence do you want to carry with you from tonight?
 - What would it mean to honor the part of you that felt seen here?
- ◆ Group share popcorn style (when running low on time):
 - One sentence to finish: "Today, I am choosing to honor my _____."

Optional Considerations:

- ◆ Offer an anonymous share box for those less comfortable speaking.
- ◆ Consider pairing the discussion with grounding activities (breathwork, gentle movement, or music).
- ◆ Share the author's contact and/or social media information, if appropriate.

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- ◆ Share the book giveaway opportunity - anyone can enter by completing the steps:

1. Share your thoughts/insights from this discussion, as it reflects on or relates to the book, on any platform you use (each platform qualifies for one entry, capped at three entries per person) & use tags #othad #bookgiveaway (if on Instagram, tag the author's account - [@ilanakovalle_artist](https://www.instagram.com/ilanakovalle_artist))
2. Send a screenshot of your "share" to the author's email - kovalleilana@gmail.com (if on Instagram, send a DM to the author's account - [@ilanakovalle_artist](https://www.instagram.com/ilanakovalle_artist))

