

IS THERE MEANING IN SUFFERING?

By Dimitrios G. Oreopoulos MD. Toronto, Canada

This article was first published in *Humane Medicine*, Volume 5, Number 2, 2005.

What is suffering?

Before we explore its meaning we should understand how we define suffering.

In 1982 the New England Journal of Medicine published the now classical paper “The Nature of Suffering and the Goals of Medicine.” In it, Eric Cassel said that suffering can be defined as a state of severe distress associated with events that threaten the intactness of the person. It can occur in relation to any aspect of the person in the realm of his social role, his group identification, his relation with self or body, or in relation to family or relation with a personal or transcendental source of meaning. Suffering never affects only one part of a person but it affects the whole being; i.e. physical, emotional, mental, spiritual and social aspects.^{1,2}

Suffering can occur when one does not expect it, or the patient does not report it when it is expected. Also, a person can suffer enormously at the distress of another, especially a loved one. Finally, as I mentioned in my introduction, suffering is a unique personal experience and can only be defined by the person who suffers.^{1,2}

Pain and suffering

Although closely identified, these two experiences are phenomenologically distinct. It is believed that the greater the pain the greater the suffering but this is not always the case. Thus childbirth can be extremely painful yet it is considered to be rewarding. Also patients can writhe from pain and not suffer if they know what is causing the pain; on the other hand, an individual may report considerable suffering from a minor discomfort if they do not know its source. Occasionally we go after the suffering as long as we know that there is a reward at the end. Lance Armstrong, commenting on his participation in the last Tour de France, said “It is a hard race, you suffer a lot. It is a long race, so it’s long suffering, which is worse than suffering”. Still he chose to go through it.

Frequently, people in pain report suffering if the pain is overwhelming and they feel out of control, if the source of pain and its meaning are unknown, or when they perceive the pain as a threat to their continued existence, not merely to their lives but to their integrity as persons.¹

Suffering and the person dying from cancer

Despite all advances made, suffering remains a hallmark of the cancer experience. The dimensions of suffering from terminal cancer are physical, i.e. pain, loneliness and isolation,

psychosocial-fear, anxiety, depression, despair, and spiritual, i.e. search for the meaning of life and suffering.^{5,6} I will make a few comments about the spiritual suffering of the dying person.

When a dying person is faced with his own mortality, his priorities and values change and his view of reality may undergo a profound change that is spiritual in nature.

Some of the spiritual issues commonly contemplated by the dying patient are: Why do we live? Does life have a meaning? Are we part of a larger reality than ourselves? Is there a higher power such as God? Why do people suffer, why do people die? etc.⁵

During the process of dying an important task for the caregiver is to help the dying person find and create meaning in the very process of experiencing the most profound of changes.⁶ It is not so much how the individual will die, but how he or she will live while dying. In order to assert in this important task, the caregiver must recognize the uniqueness of each person with cancer.⁷

Though religion may provide various rituals for expressing spirituality under these circumstances, often religious beliefs may evoke spiritual anguish and fear, particularly when pious doctrines promise eternal damnation for explicit behavior.⁵

Finally, it should be noted that physicians frequently ignore or dismiss the spiritual dimensions of suffering.

Meaning of suffering

In Agamemnon, Aeschylus said that humanity is fated to learn by suffering. It seems that every illness and misfortune in life holds within its shadow a life-affirming lesson, if we are willing to be taught by it.¹⁸ Suffering is life's most effective and profound teacher of development and growth and it furthers our efforts to find meaning in our lives.² Finding meaning, according to Victor Franke, is the primary motivation of all human beings. However, the road to change and growth is narrow and steep and, at times, one is tempted to give up and not change at all. It is not easy but it is rewarding. As they say, pain is the price of great gain.⁸

Although suffering is a universal experience it is a lonely experience and the search for its meaning is an individual's unique challenge.

When a person is faced with one of life's challenges, the human spirit responds with inner strivings, including the urge to live, to be free, to understand, to connect, to transcend. Frankl states that meaning is found through self-transcendence, that is getting outside the self or rising above self, above your own physical limitations and trying to help others.

Choosing your reaction to a blow of fate can give meaning to suffering. Choosing to be courageous or to be joyful or to transcend, or to focus on things outside the self for a great cause brings a sense of unity and oneness with nature, and with God or humankind or both⁹ and can give meaning to life. This freedom to choose our way is a freedom that can never be taken away, even in situations of severe constraint such as a concentration camp, where all other freedoms are removed.^{9,4}

Human life is justified only when it is passed in a continuous effort to expand its limits by overcoming difficulties and suffering and thus giving suffering a positive meaning.³ This made Dostoyevsky say “There is only one thing I dread: not to be worthy of my suffering.”⁴

Suffering in a hopeless situation

We must not forget that we may also find meaning in life even when confronted with a hopeless situation, facing a fate that cannot be changed. In these circumstances, what then matters is the human potential at its best, which is to transform a personal tragedy into a triumph. When we are no longer able to change a situation – we are challenged to change ourselves.

Potentially, life is meaningful under any conditions, even those which are most miserable. This presupposes the human capacity to creatively turn life’s negative aspects into something positive or constructive. Even the helpless victim of a hopeless situation, facing a fate that he cannot change may rise above himself and grow beyond himself and, by so doing, change himself and thus turn a personal tragedy into a triumph.

The way a man accepts his fate and all the suffering it entails, the way he takes up his cross, gives him ample opportunity to add a deeper meaning to his life. He may remain brave, dignified and unselfish or become bitter, fighting for self-preservation.

Human life under any circumstances never ceases to have a meaning and this infinite meaning of life includes suffering and dying. The crowning experience for a man is the wonderful feeling that, after all he has suffered, there is nothing he needs to fear any longer except his God.⁴

Suffering and healing

The healing power of suffering is an awe-inspiring mystery.

When faced with insurmountable obstacles, unknown hidden potentials in us lead us to a new purpose. In accepting our limitations to control ourselves and our lives, we learn humility, a substitute for shame, and by enduring suffering, rather than fighting it, we discover the solitary path of an inward journey. In this way, out of loneliness and pain we acquire a knowledge of ourselves and our individuality. This is a profound inner knowledge that carries its own authority. We feel grounded in something deeper, wiser and more powerful than the previous sense of self; no longer do we take life for granted. By clarifying our priorities and values, we live more wisely. While respecting the separateness of others, we feel closer to them and experience a new mutuality in relationships with loved ones.

From this new perspective one gains a deeper acceptance of life and death and an understanding of what it means to be human. The individual then knows that suffering and happiness are both part of life, and in choosing life, he chooses both. He accepts his own ordinariness and lack of perfection.

Almost every aspect of suffering is balanced by something gained through the experience and thus suffering becomes a means for great growth.

By facing fear, we achieve courage

By facing mortality, we come to celebrate life in the present and we discover the indestructibility of our own and the entire human spirit, and

By feeling alone and different from others, we discover a sense of community with all of humanity.

Thus every man who is confronted with the blows of fate has a chance of achieving something through this suffering.¹³

The meaning of love

For the healing and growth to occur in suffering, love must be present within the symbiotic relationship between patient and caregiver.

Love is the only way to grasp another human being in the innermost core of his personality. Love enables one to see the essential traits and features in the beloved person, but even more the potential in him that has not yet been realized. By his love the loving person enables the beloved to achieve his potential. By making him aware of what he can be and what he should become, he makes the potentialities come true.

Love can be defined as caring for someone and for that person's welfare in an involved meaningful way. However, such caring is not complete without assisting the patient in his search for meaning in the experience of suffering.³

Medical education and suffering

Although patients and lay persons consider the relief of suffering to be one of the primary ends of medicine, members of the medical profession do not. Patients and their friends do not make a distinction between physical and non-physical sources of suffering in the way that doctors do.¹

Unfortunately, medical education has given little explicit attention to the problem of suffering. Physicians know very little about suffering and medical students are uncertain about the relevance of suffering to their work.¹

New physicians have to learn that they can offer a great deal of support to the suffering person by their presence and by their listening. We tend to forget how important to the patient the physician's presence is. It relieves the feeling of isolation. The physician should not always think so much about what to do but rather what one should be. Balint said "The doctor's most potent medicine is himself." Simply being there for the patient and being open to their hurts can help them resolve their suffering. Knowing the patient as an individual, well enough to

understand the origin of his suffering requires empathic attentiveness and attentive listening, which take time to develop.¹¹

Finally silent presence is often effective. Thomas Merton said the silence is the training ground for the art of listening. Listening to his patient's fears, resonating with his pain but not to feel driven to urgent action can help the patient to sort out his priorities.

Conclusion

In conclusion suffering, though it is unpleasant and if it can be avoided it should be avoided, is not our enemy but a "teacher" or a "trainer" that provides us with unique opportunities for our personal growth.

I believe that suffering is such an integral part of life, that life does not have meaning without suffering.

We, as healthcare providers, have a privileged role, in helping our patients to find the meaning of their suffering.

References:

1. Cassel EJ: The nature of suffering and the goals of medicine. *New England Journal of Medicine* Vol 306, No 11 1982: pp 639-645.
2. The Hidden Dimensions of Illness: Human Suffering 1992 by Starch & McGovern. Starck PL and McGovern JP: The meaning of suffering.
3. Oreopoulos LG: The meaning of suffering. www.humanehealthcare.com Vol 1 No 2
4. Man's search for meaning by Viktor Frankl.
5. Rousseau P: The art of oncology: when the tumor is not the target. Spirituality and the dying patient. *Journal of Clinical Oncology*, Vol 18, No 9 (May) 2000: pp 2000-2002.
6. The Hidden Dimensions of Illness: Human Suffering 1992 by Starch & McGovern. LW Brallier: The suffering of terminal illness: cancer.
7. Wilkes J: Facing anger and despair in cancer. Creating a climate for hope. www.humanehealthcare.com Vol 1 No 1
8. Harpur T: Pain is the price of great gain. *Toronto Star*
9. Starck PL: The human spirit: the search for meaning and purpose through suffering. www.humanehealthcare.com Vol 8 No 2
10. Campbell SH: The meaning of the breast cancer/mastectomy experience. www.humanehealthcare.com Vol 2 No 2
11. Cassell EJ: Diagnosing suffering: A perspective. *Annals of Internal Medicine*. Vole 131 No 7 1999: pp 531-534