The Nature of Suffering

Eric J. Cassell

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Pain and Suffering are Distinct and Different
Pain and Suffering are Distinct

- People will tolerate even very severe pain:
  - If they know what it is (its significance)
  - And if they know it will end
Pain and Suffering are Distinct

- Lesser pain may be poorly tolerated
  - If it is seen as going on endlessly
  - If it is considered to have dire meaning
Pain and Suffering are Distinct

- Suffering may stop even if the pain continues
- Suffering may continue even if the pain stops
- People may suffer from pain even when it is not present
  - Fear of cancer pain recurrence
  - Migraine – before it occurs
The same things are true of other symptoms beside pain.
People who have no symptoms may suffer

- At the pain of a loved one – especial when helpless
- Helplessness itself
- Poverty
- Betrayal
- The loss of a life’s work
Two constant features of suffering

1. The importance of the future

2. The importance of meaning
Bodies may have nociception but...

- Bodies have no sense of the future – only persons do
- Bodies do not assign meaning – only persons do
Bodies do not suffer,
Only persons suffer!
A definition of suffering

- Suffering is the *specific* distress that occurs when persons feel their integrity or intactness is threatened or disintegrating.

- It continues until the threat is gone or integrity are restored.
The key term is person
A person is a whole individual human being

- A person is not a body – although a person has a body
- A person is not a mind – although a person has a mind
- A person is not a self – although a person has (probably more than one) self
Persons are different than other objects of science

- A person is not only this boundaried object in space
- A person is a trajectory through space and time
- “A historic route of the complex and ever changing society if its parts.” (A. N. Whitehead)
Persons cannot be understood by reducing them to their parts.

Do that and the person disappears.
A topography of person

- Personality
- Character
- A lived past
- A family
- The family’s past
- A collection of beliefs and meanings
- Associations with others
- Society and Culture
- A Body
- Roles
- A Work
- Persons Do Things
- Daily Activities
- A Believed In Future.
- A Secret Life
- A Transcendent or Spiritual Dimension.
Persons are of a piece

- Whatever happens to one part happens to the whole
- Whatever happens to the whole, happens to every part
Persons

- To the classic three, add a fourth
  - Physical
  - Psychological
  - Social
  - AND PERSONAL
All Suffering is Unique and Individual

- The identity that the suffering person feels will disintegrate in the future or is doing so now.
- Existed in the past
- And is projected into the future.
All Suffering is Unique and Individual

Even if two people suffer because of an identical pain, the suffering of each is unique and particular.

Why each person suffers, (not why each has pain), will be individual; related to them as individual persons.
All Suffering is Unique and Individual

It follows that one can probably never know why the person suffers.
Suffering always involves self conflict

The clue to this strange fact is that meaning always enters into suffering.

The threat to the person’s intactness or integrity lies in the meaning of the pain or beliefs about its consequences; and we are not always of one mind about this.
The lesson of Job

- There is no Job in the absence of his belief that God is just.
- The “friends” say he must be wicked.
- He knows he has not been.
- On the other hand, he is suffering the fate of the wicked.
The lesson of Job

- On the other hand “Yet does not God himself see my ways and count my every step?” (31:4)
- On the other hand, he wants to defend himself directly to God. “I would plead the whole record of my life and present it in court as my defense” (31:37)
- If God sees his every step and he IS righteous, why must he “plead the whole record of my life and present it in court as my defense”
The deepest suffering is not the privation and bodily sickness and injury. It is the conflict between what Job knows of God and what appears to be God’s action.
Chronic Illness

- Self-Esteem, Approbative ness – the desire to be approved of, emulativeness – the desire to be considered superior and related to the desire to be like those one admires

- The sick person has these desires but illness may prevent their realization. That does not stop the desire. It adds to the self-conflict
Chronic Illness

- The chronically person attempts to meet the standards of the everyday world but CANNOT.
- These standards appear to be external – the demands of society.
- But these standards are contained within verbal categories – Mother, Teacher, Doctor, Success, Pain, Sick, Patient, etc.
- The result is self-conflict. The Cancer patient who despite considerable illness continues the social or work existence.)
- The impaired person “Trying to be like everyone else” – “Everyone else” is contained within the person and the result is self-conflict.
Chronic Illness

- The conflict of self versus body
- Behaving as though the body is the enemy
  - an untrustworthy other
- A source of humiliation
  - Bowel and bladder problems
  - The source of urges that lead to social failure
THUS SUFFERING IS ALWAYS PERSONAL, INDIVIDUAL AND MARKED BY SELF-CONFLICT
All Suffering involves loss of, or profound change in central purpose

- The word purpose went out of style at the end of the 17th Century. Function was used instead - because of the introduction of the scientific age.

- But purpose pervades all:
  - Every moment
  - A hierarchy of purposes joining together.
  - Culmination in the central purpose – ME!
Purpose vs Meaning

- Viktor Frankl in Man’s Search for Meaning
  - Meaning is used as in “Finding Meaning in Life”
  - Where meaning is like purpose, as in “Finding purpose”
- Here the meaning of something is what is intended, its sense, significance, importance, interpretation
Central purpose is lost

- Purpose Shifts to the sick part.
- Just as attention goes to the sick part, so does purpose.
- The focus becomes entirely directed on the self. All purpose becomes directed at relief of pain, sickness and suffering.
- The more total and compelling the injury the more complete the redirection of purpose.
- Suffering because it arises from the injury to the whole totally redirects purpose.
All Suffering is Lonely

The Suffering Person is lonely and for two reasons –

- The individuality of suffering.
- The withdrawal of purpose from social engagement.
All Suffering is Lonely

- How do we know the suffering of others?
- Ask!
  - Are you suffering?
  - What does this mean to you?
  - What would you like me to do for you?
- Could we know the suffering person so well that we know suffering is present? Doubtful.
- Most claims to know another person is suffering arise from the error of the claim – “If that happened to me I would suffer”
Knowing the suffering of another

- The sights and sounds of suffering
- Compassion – Suffering with a person – is a reality.
- Direct transfer of feeling — empathy
  - a perception like any other and must be integrated with other perceptions
  - know but not really know.
We Can Know Another Is Suffering

- Through our shared dominion.
- We correctly read the behavior of the sufferer.
- We know we might suffer in the same circumstances.
- We feel the feelings of the sufferer.
- We become aware of the change in goals and purposes of the suffering person.
- We feel the absence of the sufferer from the “we-ness” of any expected encounter.
- Through the mutual re-enforcement of all of these, I can know that you are suffering.
And yet, the dilemma remains, 
Suffering is ultimately private 

To be so private in such distress is to be alone – even lonely. And such loneliness rising from the suffering becomes yet another source of suffering.

Thus to lift the burden of suffering somehow we must relieve its loneliness.

While respecting the sufferer as the individual he or she is and thus alone.
Almost no matter what the disease – the patient’s experience depends on the meaning

- The symptom is the symptom
- Pain is pain, SOB is SOB, nausea, edema, are what they are
- How the symptom is experienced – what the patient believes will be the future
- Is a question of the meaning assigned by the patient with or without the physician’s influence
- And meaning, as we all know, can be changed, thus changing the experience
SUFFERING IS ALWAYS PERSONAL, INDIVIDUAL, AND MARKED BY SELF-CONFLICT and LOSS OF PURPOSE AND LONELY
Suffering occurs because the patient believes that his or her integrity as a person is threatened or disintegrating.

Suffering is not pathology; it is a human state that begs for help and relief.
Two Recent Conceptualizations of Suffering

- Harvey Chochinov and the Dignity Model
  - J Clin Oncol 23:5520-5525 2005
  - J Clin Oncol 22:1336-1340 2004

- David Kissane and the Demoralization Syndrome
  - Hastings Center Rep 34:21-31 2004
  - Kissane and Clark Jour Pall Care 17:12-21 2001
The Dignity Model -- Chochinov

- Generativity – the notion that one’s life has stood for something or has some influence transcending death
- Continuity of self – being able to maintain a feeling that one’s essence is intact despite advancing illness
- Maintenance of pride – an ability to sustain a sense of positive self-regard
- Hopefulness – relates to the ability to maintain a sense of purpose
- Aftermath concerns – worries or fears concerning the burden of one’s death on others
- Care tenor – relating to the way others interact with the patient that may enhance or degrade dignity
Demoralization Syndrome – Kissane

- Demoralization ranges from a normal response to “perceived helplessness” to a morbid form of existential distress.
- Feelings of impotence, isolation, and despair.
- Self-esteem is damaged and the person feels alienated and rejected by others.
- Meaningless and hopelessness are prominent.
Demoralization Syndrome – Kissane

- Assessment of the degree of demoralization requires examining the patient’s assumptions about the world.
- The patient’s understanding of the world -- the disease, its depredations, available treatment, and prognosis (including the rate of deterioration) should square with what others (doctors and knowledgeable others) know of the patient’s world.
- At a certain point the patient’s demoralization becomes a pathological mental state.
The relief of suffering

- In medical and surgical wards suffering is quite common
  - Suffering that starts as a result of treatment is also common
  - It is not rare for patients with severe and life threatening illness to perceive the behavior of caregivers as abusive and to start to suffer as a result
  - Communications that leave the patients’ frightened, increase their uncertainty, and destroy trust leads to suffering
The Relief of Suffering

- Failures to relieve pain or other distress – or actions that actively increase distress are common
- Lack of attention to patients’ fears, isolation, losses of hope also contribute
- Failure to be aware of the social and familial dimensions of sickness are common
- Lack of awareness of these problems may be found in the best cancer centers
The Relief of Suffering

- Prominent symptoms should be relieved
- Pain MUST be relieved
- Symptoms should be prevented from recurrence where possible

BUT...

- SUFFERING CAN BE RELIEVED EVEN WHEN SYMPTOMS CANNOT
Relief of Suffering

- To be relieved suffering must be recognized
- To be recognized suffering should be suspected and looked for
- Suffering should not be confused with depression
  - Depression is common in the physically ill
  - It also occurs in the suffering
  - In sick patients who do not respond to antidepressants, suspect suffering
- Suffering responds to personal attempts to relieve it
- Suffering responds to attempts to re-establish an intact person
- Suffering is ineluctably personal and individual
- The universal symptom of suffering is loneliness
The Relief of Suffering

- Loss of purpose, self-conflict, and problems of meaning can be addressed and usually improved
Remember also that *suffering is not pathology*; it is a human state that begs for help and relief.
The Relief of Suffering is the Fundamental Goal of Medicine