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Original Article

## Finding Keys for Alleviating Human Suffering

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### Abstract

**Background:** Finding ways of alleviation suffering is something that is constantly in focus within healthcare and health research because many human beings who experience suffering often do not find a way out of it.

**Aims:** The aim of this study is to reach a nuanced understanding of the alleviation of human suffering by uncovering how adults who have lived through suffering have found ways of alleviating it. The research question is: what alleviates suffering for the human being as understood from human beings themselves?

**Methodology:** The study has a hermeneutical approach and the material was collected through interviews with ten adults who had lived through personal suffering and regained health. An interview guide was used. The texts were interpreted through hermeneutical reading.

**Results:** The results of this study revealed that experiencing loving care when one does not like oneself is crucial. Being honest about one's feelings and doubts is important. To experience that one is not alone but may share difficult feelings may alleviate suffering. Learning to let go, not seeking perfection but loving oneself unconditionally constitutes the first movement towards health. To look ahead, to seek the positive aspects in life and recreate meaning, joy of living and vitality is something that continuously requires action from the individual in order to enhance health.

**Conclusion:** Letting go of one's need for control and experiencing communion that eliminates feelings of being lonely is crucial for becoming in health. A positive attitude and actively recreating meaning in life may enhance health.

**Keywords:** suffering, health, alleviation of suffering, source of strength, wellbeing, hermeneutical reading

### Introduction

Finding ways of alleviating suffering is a fundamental purpose for health care and for health research (Eriksson, 1992). Suffering has a way of profoundly and irrevocably touching the human being's inner life of existence (Cf. Arman, 2002; Eriksson, 1994). Since it is often difficult for individuals to find ways of alleviating their suffering continual research on suffering and its alleviation is motivated. This study considers it essential to further expand the understanding of suffering and its alleviation by uncovering viewpoints from human beings themselves.

In previous research, suffering is metaphorically described as a field of force that affects everything in life (Arman, 2002). The human

being is likely to become more dependent upon his or her significant other. According to Lindholm and Eriksson (1993), suffering means that the human being experiences a lack of strength and freedom and is self-centred and passive. Suffering may also be described as a situation of chaos and resignation (Soderlund, 2004). The human being who suffers strives for health as a unity of body, mind and soul in the light of the necessity of death (Saeteren, 2006). Wiklund, Lindstrom and Lindholm (2006), however, state that suffering may be conceived as a struggle with life between shame and dignity that threatens the human being's experience of self as authentic and whole. Preserved dignity also seems to be important for the human being on the path to health (Parry & Glover, 2010).

Suffering therefore may cause an experience of being alienated from oneself and from life itself (Wiklund, 2000).

Eriksson (1994) suggests that in order to become in health the human being has first to become aware of the suffering. The transformation from suffering to health may come from a new or awakened attitude towards values and universal meanings in life (Arman & Rehnsfeldt, 2011). According to Wiklund (2000), becoming in health requires reconciliation with a new meaningful whole in life. Several studies point out that when life itself becomes visible, despite suffering, becoming in health is made possible (Hemberg, 2015; Soderlund, 2004). Lundman, Alex, Jonsen, Lovheim, Santamaki and Fischer (2012) point out that inner strength in communion is vital for health and this implies being creative, flexible and believing in one's own possibilities. Inner strength has also been described as viewing life in a positive way and being active, forming new patterns (Nygren, Norberg & Lundman, 2007) Also Fagerstrom (2010) highlights positive life-orientation as a health resource. Other studies mention faith and hope as important for becoming in health (cf. Lohne, 2008; Hughes, Closs & Clark, 2009; Fletcher, Schneider & Harry, 2010; Saarelainen, 2012).

Since earlier research points out that there are many paths that may alleviate suffering and lead to health, this study finds it important to expand the understanding of these paths of alleviating suffering to enhance health from the viewpoint of adults themselves who have gone through suffering.

### **Aims**

The aim of this study is to reach a nuanced understanding of the alleviation of human suffering by uncovering how adults who have lived through suffering have found ways of alleviating the suffering. The research question is: what alleviates suffering for the human being as understood from human beings themselves?

### **Theoretical framework**

This study's theoretical framework is based on Eriksson's caritative theory as part of a caring science tradition (Eriksson, Bondas-Salonen, Herberts, Lindholm, & Matilainen, 1995; Lindstrom, Nystrom, & Zetterlund, 2014).

According to this tradition, the human being is put at the centre of everything. The human being is seen to consist of a unity of body, soul and spirit and is viewed as unique, holy and inviolable.

Health is something that may develop from the human being's own will. Health is, according to the ontological perspective of caring science, understood as a "doing", "being" and "becoming" which refers to a movement towards deeper wholeness and holiness. When the human being's inner health potential is touched, a movement occurs, and this movement is seen in the different dimensions of health as "doing", "being", and "becoming" in a wholeness. "Becoming" comprises a deeper level of integration and feeling of wholeness (Eriksson et al. 1995; Eriksson, 2007; Lindstrom et al., 2014).

Health and suffering are seen as constantly present in human life. Health cannot be understood separately from a deeper wholeness that includes suffering, and also health is seen as a becoming (Eriksson et al. 1995; Lindstrom et al., 2014)

Suffering implies experiences of worthlessness and may therefore be profoundly destructive for the individual (Eriksson, 1994; Eriksson et al. 1995). Feelings of being lonely and alienated from oneself are common and, therefore, the very existence of the human being is threatened. Suffering in itself has no meaning, but when linked to something else it may be of existential importance for the human being and may be alleviated because health and suffering are integrated with each other in a constantly present movement (Eriksson, 1994; Wiklund, 2000).

Zest for life may be enabled through suffering (Eriksson et al., 1995). This study considers it important to expand our understanding of how suffering may be alleviated according to the views of adults themselves.

### **Methodological aspects**

This study was inspired by the thoughts of Gadamer (2004) and uses a hermeneutical approach. Focused interviews with ten adults who have lived through personal suffering constituted the material of the study. An interview guide was used as a guideline for the focus interviews and a hermeneutical reading of the texts was used as a method (Koskinen & Lindstrom, 2013).

### **Participants and data collection**

The focused interview data was gathered in ten different interviews, with a total of ten participants. The age range of the participants was 19 to 64 years. The inclusion criteria for study participation was being 19 years or older, having lived through personal suffering and being willing to give informed consent, as well as having a desire to share difficult experiences. The participants were chosen by the researcher from the media or the Internet. Participants that had earlier been willing to share their life stories and tell about their experiences of suffering and path to health were chosen. Initially, the participants were contacted by email and received an invitation to participate in the study and were given brief information about the interview questions. Each interview lasted for 60 to 90 minutes, and all the interviews were digitally taped and transcribed. Study participation, data storage and handling for research purposes were approved by the participants when they provided their informed consent. The participants were informed both orally and in writing about the study purpose, confidentiality, withdrawal of consent and publication intent.

### **Ethical considerations**

Seen from an ethical perspective, it may be defensible to carry out this study because it might reasonably provide an alleviation of suffering for those who put their experiences into words and share it. Permission to conduct the study was granted by the ethical committee of Abo Akademi University. The participants in this study have been treated with respect in order to preserve their dignity throughout the research process. If there were difficult feelings among any of the participants during the interviews the researcher stayed with this person for a longer period of time. The study follows The Finnish National Advisory Board on Research Ethics (2012).

### **Results**

The results of this study revealed that in order to experience loving care when one does not like oneself is fundamental for becoming in health. To experience that one is not alone but may share difficult feelings may alleviate suffering. Being honest about one's feelings and doubts is important. Learning to let go, looking ahead through seeking the positive aspects in life and

recreating meaning, joy of living and vitality may enhance health.

### **To experience loving care when one does not like oneself**

Data from the participants shows that loving and close relations are essential for alleviating suffering. Having relations that one could always count on and trust represented a source of strength. These were people how loved the respondents no matter what and who were not jealous or out to harm them. One respondent stated:

*"It is important to be able to feel liked, that someone cares about me even if I do not care about myself when I do not feel well, that someone still likes me."*

It was important that someone else liked them and this insight helped them go through the darkest moments of their suffering when they hated life and themselves the most. This helped them to find hope and to begin to like life and eventually even like themselves again. It was also important that others helped them to realize that they had a value as a human being and were just as worthy as everyone else.

*"When these people prayed for me I realized that I was precious. That I was as worthy as other people... I started to like myself on a deeper level, not just as the person with a false façade."*

### **The truth is merciful – being honest in the presence of difficult feelings and doubts**

It is essential to be true and honest about one's feelings. This means accepting everything about oneself, and not suppressing anything. This does not mean that one has to like everything about oneself but that one has to realize that "this is me". One participant talked about the truth as the most merciful path to health.

*"No matter how miserable I am, if I am honest and whatever things emerge, it is still for the best because this is where healing and growth may take place. But as long as I lie and hide I will neither heal nor grow."*

The participants discussed that one sometimes must go through doubts in order to find strength. This doubt might become a form of resistance that one has to struggle against and overcome.

Many suffering human beings must constantly achieve something in order to prove to themselves that they are good enough in order to resist doubts and feelings of worthlessness, doubts about themselves and their worth as a human being as well as about the meaning of life. Another participant expressed the need for being true to one's sorrow and giving oneself time to be sad. One side to this sorrow was to eventually release anger as there may be strength in one's anger. Thanks to this anger one may be able to give oneself a value as a human being. Giving oneself a value is fundamental for alleviating suffering, and anger might potentially initiate the first movement towards becoming in health and, consequently, represents a great impact for health.

*“It was important to be angry, because that anger had to be released. It came after the tears, and the feeling that I should have been worth something better as a child. And as you think that you should have been worth something better, there is power in that because you give yourself a value. In this way, anger provides the energy that can enable you to get out of suffering.”*

#### **To experience that one is not alone but may share difficult feelings**

Several participants mentioned that it was of great importance to realize that they were not alone in the world with their suffering. Other participants talked about that their family or friends were as important in order to help them feel safe. The communion provided them with hope and the feeling that they belonged to someone and were not alone. This gave them a sense of value and dignity. Talking with someone and having the opportunity to share difficult feelings was important because this provided relief. One participant mentioned a friend that had helped him a great deal since he could phone this friend at any time. This friend always had a way of calming him down by saying that everything would be alright. Another participant expressed:

*“It was hard and almost unbearable, but then one day I realized that I was not alone. It was completely unexpected to discover that other people had gone through the same thing. Earlier, I always felt lonely and unworthy, but it felt incredibly liberating when I discovered*

*that many others had experienced the same thing and that I could share my experiences with them.”*

#### **Learning to let go, not seeking perfection but loving oneself**

One path towards health consists of learning to let go and not seeking perfection in one's life. It feels liberating not having to be in control of everything. This means to learn to be content in daily life and not wishing for things that are unrealistic or impossible. This also means learning to love oneself and not seeking perfection since this might be destructive for health. One participant mentioned that it is fundamental issue and a health potential to learn to let go and not having to be in control all the time. Some related this to their religious beliefs and their relationship with good and that letting go also is the prerequisite for having this relationship. One may not play a role or take on a mask before God because this will not lead to anything as He sees through everything. One participant expressed:

*“I gave the power to God. Before that I had had the power over my own life and during that time it went all to blazes.”*

One participant talked about the importance of learning to love oneself again and not thinking that it does not matter what happens with oneself and eat junk food and smoke and so on. That is why one first has to learn to love oneself, both the bright and dark sides of one's personality. One participant stated:

*“No matter how much you hear others saying how good you are, if you do not think you are worth anything you will not find inner strength.”*

#### **To look ahead, seek the positive aspects and recreate meaning, joy of living and vitality**

To find strength to health, positive thinking and thinking ahead is important. Depending on the situation, one might not benefit from planning too long ahead but instead try to find the balance that suits one's life situation. Planning too far ahead might produce negative effects also if the suffering human being did not see the plans as realistic or reachable. Therefore balance was seen as crucial, adjusting the plans according to the suffering human being's own unique state of being. It was also seen as fundamental to find



something positive as a starting-point as there are always bright spots, but sometimes it takes effort to see them when one does not feel well. When the human being has reached a certain point in sorrow or suffering, it is important that he or she surrenders and tries to move on and frees him or herself. Of course one cannot fully forget a sorrow but it is important to move on and not allow oneself to feel bitter. Holding on to hope as well as never giving up is important. One must force oneself to do something since this will help one survive. The source of strength lies within oneself since everything is located in one's mind, in the attitude one chooses to adopt towards different aspects in life. It is possible to learn to begin to think positively and not turn oneself into a victim.

*“It is also important to actively try to recreate meaning in life, to create meaning in what feels meaningless, for what has happened has happened. To recreate meaning and joy of living is an ongoing process that will continue for as long as we live.”*

## Discussion

This study indicates that it is important for the suffering human being to learn to love him or herself again, since suffering often makes one lose the experience of having a value as a human being and one may instead feel worthless. Through learning to love oneself again suffering may be alleviated. A prerequisite for this is, however, that one understands oneself as being equal to and having a dignity equal to everyone else. For the suffering human being to rebuild his or her dignity requires that he or she experiences loving care from a concrete other such as a significant other or a friend. This might help the person to learn to appreciate him or herself again, and eventually to give him or herself a value and dignity as a human being again, that has often been hidden due to the shame and guilt that accompany suffering (Cf. Wiklund et al., 2006). To begin to accept and love oneself again constitutes the path towards alleviating suffering and becoming in health (Cf. Eriksson, 1994; Hemberg, 2015; Parry & Glover, 2010).

Another central finding in this study was the importance for the suffering human being to daily seek and look for the positive aspects in life and thereby recreate joy of living and meaning in life (Cf. Eriksson, 1994; Lundman et al. 2012;

Nygren et al., 2007). Since it may be difficult for a suffering human being to find the brighter sides of life, when all seems veiled in darkness due to the suffering, it requires that the human being actively works with him or herself and learns to strive and struggle against dark thoughts in order to find bright sides to focus on in daily life.

In this study, not striving for perfection in one's undertakings in daily life was regarded as a health potential; it was liberating to let go of one's need for controlling every aspect of life. This also required a certain amount of contentment in daily life, and not seeking the unreachable or unrealistic. It was crucial to also face one's feelings truthfully, both negative and positive ones. An interesting aspect in relation to this that emerged in this study was that the truth is merciful and may act as a path towards the alleviation of suffering and the way to health. This meant accepting all sides of one's personality and one's feelings and not suppressing any parts of it. Therefore, it was liberating to let one's feelings shine through and affirm all of them. Anger or doubts, for example, was a somewhat unexpected and paradoxical result in this study. Anger may, when regarded in a sound way by the suffering human being, act as a path towards establishing a new understanding of one's value and dignity as a human being. The aspect of anger somewhat differed from those found in earlier research. Anger might even, according to this study, initiate a movement or energy that incites feelings of injustice in terms of that one deserves the same value as everyone else and that one has as much dignity as everyone else. This might lead to the re-establishment of one's dignity as a lynchpin for one's health. However, anger or doubts might also become a risk if the suffering human being uses it in a destructive way and does not find the light to appreciate life and oneself or give oneself a value. Anger might even become something that leads one into increased suffering if one does not find the brighter sides of life and learns to love life but instead allows hatred or bitterness to lead the way.

The experience of not being alone in one's suffering or that many others had experienced the same was something that could alleviate suffering in a powerful way (Cf. Wiklund et al., 2006). It was liberating and a comfort to discover that others had also gone through similar experiences. Sharing one's feelings of suffering

was important because this could alleviate suffering. It was important to be able to break the pattern of feeling alone in one's suffering and instead recreate meaning (Cf. Arman & Rehnsfeldt, 2011), joy of living and vitality in order to become in health.

### Conclusions

This study has revealed that being true to one's feelings and not suppress them is crucial for alleviating suffering. Letting go of one's need for control and breaking the pattern of feeling alone in one's suffering and instead experiencing communion may give strength for health. A positive attitude and actively recreating meaning in life may also enhance health. Further research should focus on how this recreation of the positive aspects in life may be enhanced and how meaning in life may be rebuilt as well as on how the suffering human being may find joy of living and vitality. The aspect of anger or doubt in relation to dignity as a source of strength is an interesting aspect that also needs further research.

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