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Original Article

Experiencing Deeper Dimensions of Gratitude, Well-being and Meaning in Life after Suffering

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Abstract

Background: Earlier research indicates that human beings after suffering often go through personal changes and dedicate to themselves a greater understanding of life.

Aims: The aim of this study is to uncover the deeper dimensions in the understanding of life that the human being may dedicate to herself or himself after having lived through suffering. The research question is: what existential changes and deeper dimensions in the understanding of life may the human being dedicate to herself or himself after having lived through suffering?

Methodology: A hermeneutical approach is used in this study. The material was collected through focused interviews with ten adults who had lived through personal suffering. The texts were interpreted through hermeneutical reading. Participation in the study, data storage and handling for research purposes were approved by the participants when they provided their informed consent. Permission to conduct the study was granted by an ethical committee.

Results: The results show that human beings experience deeper gratitude, wisdom and meaning in life after suffering. Human beings show greater empathy and acceptance of others. The courage to create well-being is strengthened since they attain a greater awareness of their inner source of strength. Living in the present becomes important at the same time as a greater awareness of life's fragility and finiteness evolves.

Conclusion: After having lived through suffering the human being has potential to grow and gain deeper gratitude in life thanks to a deeper awareness of the existential dimensions. The human being gains greater empathy and understanding of suffering. Further research should focus on uncovering the existential fragility that emerged as an interesting aspect in this study that adults experience after suffering.

Keywords: suffering, existential issues, gratitude, meaning in life, well-being, quality of life, interviews, hermeneutical reading

Introduction

Suffering is, because of its elusive nature, a phenomenon at the centre of much attention within caring science research (Cf. Anderson, 2014). Suffering may never fully be understood merely through reading fragmented and loose theoretical descriptions of it, but, as it has deeper dimensions to it, requires that it is understood in the light of the human being, the human being's health and life, that is, in the light of the human being's own experiences and stories. The human being's inner existence and values is profoundly

and irrevocably touched by suffering (Cf. Arman, 2002; Eriksson, 1994). Wiklund (2006) states that suffering involves a struggle with life between shame and dignity that threatens the human being's experience of self as authentic and whole. Suffering causes an experience of being shut out from others and from life itself (Wiklund, 2000).

Gradually, when the human being has 'suffered enough' hope emerges and a future (however changed) may be envisioned (Morse, 2000).

Suffering turns peoples' lives upside down (Angstrom-Brannstrom et al., 2015). According to Arman (2002), suffering may be metaphorically described as a field of force that affects everything in life. This means that existential questions are also raised, such as the meaning of suffering and of life. Making or recreating meaning in suffering, for instance, after experiencing cancer, is crucial for well-being (Park, Edmondson, Fenster & Blank, 2008). After having lived through suffering, adults often describe how suffering opened their eyes to unexpected deeper dimensions of meaning in life (Barron, 2000; Bussing, 2014) and that they would not want to be without the experience since it had made them a whole person. This study therefore considers it important to uncover, from the human beings' own views, these deeper dimensions in the understanding of life that the human beings may dedicate to themselves after having lived through it.

Earlier research indicates that suffering has the potential of providing the human being with a new meaning and gratitude in life (Cf. Balthip & Purnell 2014; Bussing, 2014; Strang & Strang, 2001; Tibus & de Souza, 2011). Also Sacco, Park and Suresh (2014) report that a sense of a positive meaning in life increases as a result of experiencing suffering. Gratitude is strongly related to well-being, but may be unique and causal (Wood, Froh & Geraghty, 2010), and gratitude is also related to personal growth, purpose in life and self-acceptance. Furthermore, gratitude is found to be unique to well-being (Wood, Joseph & Maltby, 2009). The human being's experiences of suffering such as a life-threatening illness is an assault on the whole person, including his or her health connections (Mount, Boston & Cohen, 2007). This means that suffering affects a person physically, socially and spiritually (Fernandes, Papaikonomou & Nieuwoudt, 2006; Mount et al., 2007). After having experienced suffering, the human being's health expands and the health connections evolve towards a sense of bonding to self, others, the universal dimensions in life and the ultimate meaning. Experiencing suffering moreover contributes to understanding life and enhances meaning and quality of life. Finally, however, suffering can be said to entail a deep and complex personal experience. As a consequence, suffering remains an individual issue that depends on a person's life circumstances,

personality, past and present experiences and the surrounding environment (Fernandes et al., 2006). With regards to the earlier mentioned research, this study wishes to highlight human beings' own experiences and understanding of life after suffering.

Aims

The aim of this study is to reach a nuanced understanding of what deeper dimensions in the understanding of life the human being may dedicate to herself or himself after suffering. The research question is: what existential changes and deeper dimensions in the understanding of life may the human being dedicate to herself or himself after having lived through suffering?

Theoretical framework

This study and 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 and is seen to consist of a unity of body, soul and spirit that is unique, holy and inviolable. Health is understood as a "doing", "being" and "becoming", according to the ontological perspective of caring science. This means a movement towards deeper wholeness and holiness. When the human being's inner health potential is touched, a movement occurs, and this is seen in the different dimensions of health as "doing", "being", and "becoming" in 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 (Eriksson et al. 1995; Lindstrom et al., 2014).

Suffering might be profoundly destructive for the human being since it implies experiences of worthlessness (Eriksson, 1994; Eriksson et al. 1995). Feelings of being abandoned or of being alienated from oneself are common, and the very existence of the human being is threatened. Suffering is described as a battle or a struggle where the human being fights for regaining health. In itself suffering has no meaning. But when bound to something else, suffering may be of existential importance for the human being and

may be alleviated since health and suffering are integrated with each other in a constantly present movement (Eriksson, 1994; Wiklund, 2000). Suffering may therefore enable zest for life (Eriksson et al, 1995). If the human being may ascribe to suffering a meaning which resides alongside the suffering this might give strength to become in health (Eriksson, 1994). This study considers it crucial to uncover different ways of alleviating suffering according to the views of adults who have lived through suffering and gained health.

Methodological aspects

For the hermeneutical approach used, this study was inspired by the thoughts of Gadamer (2004). The material consisted of focused interviews with adults who have lived through personal suffering. An interview guide was used as a guideline for the interviews and the method consisted of a hermeneutical reading of the texts according to Koskinen and Lindstrom (2013).

Participants, data collection and ethical considerations

Ten different interviews were performed with ten adults in the age range of 19 to 64 years old. The inclusion criteria was being 19 years or older, having lived through suffering and being willing to give informed consent, and talk about their suffering. Study participation and data storage for research purposes were approved by the participants when they provided their informed consent. Permission to conduct the study was granted by the ethical committee of Abo Akademi University. The study follows The Finnish National Advisory Board on Research Ethics (2012).

Results

The results of this study show that human beings experience deeper gratitude, humbleness and meaning in life after suffering. Humans show greater empathy and acceptance of diversity among other humans. The courage to live is strengthened which makes way for well-being.

Deeper gratitude, humbleness and meaning in life after suffering

A common aspect among people after having lived through suffering is that they experience a personal growth towards becoming more mature or authentic, and that they dedicate an inner wisdom to themselves. They possess greater gratitude, humbleness and love for life which

ultimately may provide them with a sense of well-being.

I appreciate life much more. I never take anything for granted and I would probably have magnified small problems had I not experienced the suffering...

Adults having gone through suffering live much more in the present than before and try to seize the day. They no longer prioritize superficial things such as money or status. They tend to prioritize their family and appreciate the life that they have instead of longing for a life that they would like to have but never will. One respondent said:

“Today, I have a more positive outlook on life because I know that it is important for me so I force myself to look for the positive in everything.”

Adults having gone through suffering are more likely to feel search for a meaning and see that life has a tendency of taking its own path.

“I have a great need for creating meaning with it [with the suffering]. Maybe I would not want to have my suffering undone since I became the one I am and do what I do because of it. I am reconciled with what happened, but I don't think I will ever stop feeling pain when I look back.”

Adults who have gone through suffering realize that it is crucial to recreate meaning in life, to create meaning in the meaningless, as it were, because what has happened has happened and cannot be undone. One adult said:

“Today, I have great love for life... I have begun to think that perhaps it is my destiny to give love to people who are different because I have so much love within.”

The adults found that their mission in life became to live their lives as well as possible. After having gone through sorrow, the adults realize that it is important to not follow the thoughts of bitterness or let envy enter into one's mind since it has a way of tainting everything else. It is important to share difficult thoughts

with others since this takes the edge off such feelings.

Greater empathy and acceptance of diversity among other humans

Adults who have lived through suffering have a greater empathy and acceptance of diversity among other people. They have more respect and view others with humble eyes. They care for others naturally from the heart and are happy when they are able to help someone else.

“I have more respect for my fellow beings. I do not compartmentalize people, or try not to do it, and instead think that all people have their own story that makes them who they are.”

These adults are also able to forgive themselves and others as well as view everyone as equal. The respondents were generally more in touch with their emotions, since they understand suffering and may, on a deeper level, put themselves in another person's position and understand his or her feelings and show compassion.

“My acceptance for other people and the way they are is greater... It's very hard to try and change the way you think if you think negatively and try to think positively, but after a while it becomes natural for you to do so. I have been through so much that I have attained a greater understanding of life and suffering.”

Courage to live and setting limits in order to make way for well-being

For adults who have lived through suffering, having more courage is characteristic. They have the courage to live, set limits and choose how they wish to live. They are not afraid of what other people might think and say about their actions. One adult said:

“I don't accept being subjected to negative energy from others, I am better at setting limits than before. I have, because of the illness, become more courageous in stating what I want.”

The adults consider what they truly want themselves. They are able to set limits and say

not to things as they are able to prioritize according to their own will. They plan their life more realistically so that the goals are reachable and thereby make way for well-being. One respondent expressed:

“I no longer fear death. People will die anyway, one may fall down the stairs and die. One should not be afraid of dying because then one is also afraid of living.”

Living in the present but also with a new existential fragility

Adults having gone through suffering have a greater awareness of life as fragile and finite. They therefore live more authentically, there is no false façade but they stay true to themselves. They see through shallowness and stand with their feet firmly on the ground even in adversity, and tend to look for positive aspects of everything. One adult said:

“Well, as regards hope, I think that if I have a bad day I try to look for the positive, I think that if I have a bad day today, tomorrow can only be better.”

Many things change for adults having lived through personal suffering. One important aspect is trust or the illusion that these things happen other people, not me, and that this illusion is now gone. They view life the way it is and understand that suffering affects them over and over again, anywhere, and that anything can happen. Suffering therefore also entail a form of existential fear, a sense of treading unsteady ground. At the same time, after having lived through suffering, one also carries a sense of a greater safety within on which to fall back. One knows that there is a possibility of something happening again. The adults are more alive today than before since they are so much aware of life's fragility. One adult stated:

“One realizes that life is finite, that one must live in the here and now, not look for tomorrow...I prioritize experiences more than work.”

True joy, instead of the dark hopelessness that reigned earlier, enters the human being. Everything is experienced more powerfully and

therefore the awareness of life's finiteness and death becomes more real. This makes the sorrow deeper but also makes joy more joyful. Both sorrow and joy acquire unanticipated new and deeper dimensions, dimensions that the adults who have experienced suffering do not wish to be without, because they see them as a resource that brings an enhanced quality in life. They learn to see that suffering is part of life and the path of the human being, and that after darkness light appears, and that this light always wins out in the end.

Greater awareness of one's inner source of strength

Adults having lived through suffering bear witness to having a greater awareness of life and they have stronger ability to listen to their inner source of strength. They are in constant change towards growth, towards the future. Their goals and visions are sound and they do not just think of themselves but also wish to help others.

"I have become more aware of my inner source of strength. I listen more inwards and have a more positive view of myself and find I have more energy today than before I experienced my suffering. My survival instinct is much stronger, I know myself better and feel better."

Through their suffering and different experiences of illness, the adults have learnt to find strength from daily life, see things in a new light and therefore live a richer life. They try to handle things in life and are more efficient and equipped to meet new challenges, because they feel life may offer new hardships even if one has already been ill once. They have an inner strength of seeing life from the bright side and simultaneously become all the more aware of their potential and how they manage to focus on the good aspects in life. The adults view life in a more hopeful way and see that there is always a way out of misery. One participant expressed that a spiritual faith that this person did not have before had been awakened through suffering.

"God has become part of my life... He is with me in a concrete way everyday... I drive quite a bit in my work and speak to God and sometimes sing to Him... Earlier I felt very lonely if I didn't have

anyone next to me or on the phone. It was like constant anxiety and darkness. Today, I feel joy and peace because God is always with me. It makes all the difference, it's as if someone has turned on a light."

Discussion

Deeper gratitude, humbleness, and meaning in life emerged as something that adults who have successfully lived through suffering have in common (Cf. Balthip & Purnell 2014; Barron, 2000; Bussing et al., 2014; Park et al., 2008; Strang & Strang, 2001; Tibus & de Souza, 2011). Their values in life were also changed (Cf. Arman, 2002; Eriksson, 1994). Suffering may eventually lead to a deeper sense of self awareness and ultimately sense of well-being. This was also interpreted as an inner life wisdom and love that made the adults appreciate life. Superficial things felt less important and the adults realized the importance of daily creating new meaning in life in order to increase the sense of well-being (Cf. Park et al., 2008). The participants allowed themselves to be guided by love and compassion and had a more hopeful, positive and realistic outlook on life (Cf. Morse, 2000). They felt they were better prepared for future adversity and suffering because they knew there was a way out of it.

After having lived through suffering, the participants bore witness to going through personal growth, and having greater empathy and acceptance for the diversity among other human beings. They respected humans equally and with humbleness and had a natural and inner wish to help their fellow beings. They were also more in touch with their emotions, and thanks to their life-experiences, they were able to understand suffering on a deeper existential level and thereby listen to and understand others' experiences of suffering, and provide them with genuine support. Suffering affects the human being as a whole and his or her life experience (Cf. Fernandes et al., 2006; Mount et al., 2007; Angstrom-Brannstrom et al., 2015), but also simultaneously brings gratitude to life, self and others. Also Wood et al. (2009; 2010) mention that an experience of gratitude is often connected to a sense of well-being.

The respondents also found greater courage to live their lives according to their own desires and set limits. Also Eriksson (1994) states that

courage is born through trials. They were able to listen to their inner longing, and say no to things they knew did not make them experience well-being. They were also able to prevent bad energy from others, by sorting out which were their true friends. The courage gave them strength to live and to not be afraid of suffering or death. An interesting result was, however, that at the same time as the respondents felt more alive they were also more aware of life's fragility and finiteness. They were paradoxically more vulnerable at the same time as they were stronger as human beings. In other words, suffering simultaneously gave them life wisdom and well-being but also an existential suffering in the form of an awareness of fragility or vulnerability and worry that anything could change in a second (Cf. Wiklund, 2006). However, this existential suffering emerged as a new aspect that somewhat differed from earlier research within this field. The adults did not wish to have their suffering undone, since it made them possess a greater confidence on which they could rely if life surprised them again with unexpected suffering or problems. Their experience of life became stronger; ultimately life acquired deeper dimensions overall which made them experience life in a more powerful way. Because the participants saw suffering as something that enriched their lives and enhanced their quality of life, they did not want to be without these dimensions nor their experiences of suffering. They learned to see suffering as part of life and of the human being's path and that after darkness comes light which ultimately defeats darkness.

The greater life awareness experienced by the adults could also be interpreted as a stronger ability to listen to one's inner source of strength (C.f. Hemberg, 2015; Hemberg et al. 2016). The participants had better self-awareness and were able to set boundaries in order to preserve their well-being. In addition, they saw life in a completely new light (see, one adult expressed: *"It's as if someone has turned on a light"*). This experience had made them recreate meaning in daily life and look for the positive aspects in everything as well as balance negative thoughts.

The adults did not feel that they were alone in dark suffering anymore but rather that they were guarded in a safe communion of light and joy were they could be their authentic selves and view life with hope on their path towards growth (Cf. Sacco et al., 2014).

Conclusions

This study shows that after having lived through suffering adults have the potential for personal growth as well as for becoming whole as human beings. There is a deeper gratitude in and love of life, a deeper awareness of the existential dimensions and the courage and will to live according to the human calling of loving one's neighbour. The human beings gain a greater empathy and understanding of themselves and others as well as of suffering. Further research should focus on uncovering an interesting aspect that emerged in this study, namely the existential fragility or vulnerability that adults experience after having lived through suffering.

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