

Meaningful Suffering

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The above title sums up the main thrust of all my academic and professional activities this year. It is never easy to change people's deeply entrenched negative view of suffering, but I have at least turned the corner, thanks to the pandemic. Now, more people are interested in learning about the protective and transformative benefits of suffering.

Some people may wonder how my suffering hypothesis is related to Jonathan Haidt's (2006) happiness hypothesis. Indeed, the two hypotheses are not only similar in linking ancient wisdom to modern science, but they are also inextricably related to each other as two sides of the same coin.

In other words, neither hypothesis can stand by itself, because the single-minded pursuit of happiness without paying attention to the dark side of life and our inherent vulnerabilities is self-handicapping (Fowers et al., 2017), whereas focusing on liberation from suffering will not be effective without the joy of living.

These two hypotheses represent two essential functions of the soul: (a) to satisfy the soul's yearning for happiness through meaning work, loving relationships, and serving something or someone greater than we are; and (b) to satisfy the soul's ultimate concerns and need to co-exist with evil, suffering, and limitations. These two functions need to work together to achieve healing and flourishing according to my dual-system model (Wong, 2012).

This is how we can avoid the extreme of either too much happiness or too much suffering because every extreme will trigger a strong reaction. It is through integrating happiness and

suffering that we can find the middle way – to be safely happy and to suffer joyfully (Soper, 2020; Wong, 2011).

The New Science of Flourishing Through Suffering

The above discussion provides a backdrop for the need of the new science of necessary and meaningful suffering. Way back in 2003, I already proposed that the suffering hypothesis is necessary for happiness. Here is a quote from my original article (Wong, 2003):

“Why is happiness so illusive and intractable? Why is it that after thousands of psychological studies on this topic, most people still find happiness an empty promise? Why are progress and prosperity not translated into an increase in happiness and quality of life? How do we explain this paradox?

One hypothesis is that perhaps most people have been looking for happiness in all the wrong places, and they don't really know what it looks like. They might not even recognize it when happiness lands on their lap like a butterfly....

(1) Life is always a mixture of happiness and suffering. No one is immune from pain and we all live under the shadow of suffering and death,

(2) There is often a complex and dynamic relationship between happiness and suffering.

There is a Chinese saying: "The extreme form of happiness produces sorrow." Just as happiness may lead to suffering, so does suffering lead to happiness.

In sum, there are no perfect pictures of happiness, no clear-cut unalloyed joy. A complete understanding of happiness needs to take into account the above two principles.”

During the last 20 years, much has changed in our society as well as in positive psychology (Wong, 2019, 2020a). My latest publication (Wong, Mayer et al., 2021) provides a

glimpse of the progress made in testing and developing the suffering hypothesis. To illustrate this progress, here is a quote from that publication:

“Suffering Provides New Grounds for Hope and Happiness: Suffering teaches us life intelligence and calm-based mature happiness as an antidote to a shallow view of life.

Wong's has published extensively on tragic optimism and mature happiness (Wong and McDonald, 2002; Wong, 2009b, 2017c; Wong and Bowers, 2018). An existential perspective enables us to see life as it is and yet with a trauma-informed positivity.

Sustainable wellbeing can be achieved through learning how to make the best use of the dynamic and dialectic interplay between positive and negative life experiences in each context. The ancient Yin-Yang dialectic or the contemporary dual-system model (Wong, 2012) provides a blueprint of how to navigate between opposite forces, such as good and evil, and self and other, which are prevalent in life (Lomas and Ivtzan, 2016; Wong and Bowers, 2018; Deng et al., 2020; Wong, 2020c).

To succeed in life or achieve wellbeing, one needs to find the right balance between Yin and Yang. In other words, PP2.0 represents the complete circle or the wholeness of wellbeing in which Yin and Yang co-exist in optimal balance and harmony as shown in the Yin-Yang symbol.

Several papers in this issue show that suffering can lead to deeper joy, inner harmony, or calm-based happiness (Carreno et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2021; Robbins, 2021; Wasowicz et al., 2021); existential gratitude and altruistic behavior (Al-Refae et al., 2021; Jans-Beken, 2021; Kotera & van Gordon, 2021; Kotera et al., 2021); and a sense of tragic optimism (Leung et al., 2021; Mead et al., 2021) through dialectics and courage (Bai et

al., 2021; Ferreira et al., 2021; Rajkumar, 2021; Van Tongeren & Showalter Van Tongeren, 2021).”

The Worst of Times and the Best of Times

This is probably the worst of times in terms of global disruptions and devastation, but it is also the best of times in terms of transforming people’s lives to a more meaningful and authentic existence (Frankl, 1946/1985). Life has meaning to the extent that suffering has meaning. How we respond to our fate and suffering determines whether become better or bitter, as Frankl (1946/1985) wrote in his classic *Man’s Search for Meaning*:

“The way in which a man accepts his fate and all the suffering it entails, the way in which he takes up his cross, gives him ample opportunity – even under the most difficult circumstances – to add a deeper meaning to his life.”

Frankl’s concept of the human search for meaning, or self-transcendence, was fully expanded by Wong (2014, 2016, 2020b, 2021a), as well as by Wong, Arslan and colleagues (2021).

This year is by far the most productive year for me to spread the message of flourishing through meaning and suffering. More than any other year, in 2021, I had a total of 10 articles published in refereed journal with two additional papers still under review. I also published 8 chapters, offered numerous webinars globally, and appeared in several podcasts (for details, please see [my curriculum vitae](#)).

In addition to organizing this year’s meaning conference and presenting two global webinars on how to thrive during COVID-19, here are three noteworthy events this year which helped attract more attention to existential positive psychology:

1. Establishment of INPM's [Research Institute on Flourishing and Suffering](#) (RIFS) to advance research.
2. My presentation to Harvard's Human Flourishing Program on *The Surprising New Science of Suffering: What is Suffering? How Can We Turn it into Flourishing?* (Wong, 2021b). [See the full video recording here.](#)
3. Appearing on Scott Barry Kaufman's podcast – the world's most popular psychology podcast – and speaking about existential positive psychology. [See the full podcast here.](#)

Conclusion: How do we Flourish Through Suffering?

In sum, suffering contributes to flourishing in four ways:

- (1) Suffering triggers one's search for meaning as a better option than addiction, aggression, and suicide in very trying times.
- (2) It motivates people to voluntarily embrace sacrifice in order to become one's best, thus making suffering more meaningful and worthwhile.
- (3) It teaches people how to manage or overcome painful emotions and experiences so that they can have greater likelihood to be happy and healthy.
- (4) It serves several protective and transformative functions, such as diagnostic, curative, redemptive, character building, and contributing to resilience and personal growth.

I am most grateful to be able to continue developing my suffering hypothesis. I could have died a couple of times, but God has spared my life so that I can bring meaning and happiness to the suffering people.

Finally, I want to express my gratitude to all the members of the INPM community for their partnership and support. I wish you a blessed and safe holiday.

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