

How to Cope With Unavoidable Suffering

By Lou LaGrand

Unavoidable suffering is a condition of existence, a part of the mystery that shrouds every life. It is usually the result of broken attachments to those we love or the loss of something cherished. It cannot be prevented because death and perpetual change are uncontrollable givens of living.

On the other hand, much suffering can be prevented by making wise choices. But there is so much more unavoidable suffering that we refuse to acknowledge as the expected consequence of the natural movement of life. Of course, there are many things we do to generate unnecessary suffering. Poor decisions lead to catastrophic outcomes. Neurotic guilt visits most of us, and refusing to accept the inevitable (trying to resist nature) adds significantly to the pain of life.

Here is how others have eased their suffering. These approaches can be lessons for your own confrontations with unavoidable distress.

1. Reframe your attitude. Begin by dismissing the following thought from your mind: you have not been singled out to suffer. You are not bad or have bad karma, nor have you done something wrong. No divine being, earthly force, or a run of bad luck is behind it. Legitimate suffering cycles into and out of everyone's life. Nobody is immune from its ravages. We are brought up in a culture that teaches that no one should suffer. That in itself is a major cause of unnecessary suffering. Acceptance, as difficult as it is, is the only way through this conflict. Know what you can and cannot control.
2. Develop diversion strategies. Planned diversions are an integral part of practicing positive mental health. You cannot continuously suffer without getting sick in some way. Everyone needs ways to shift their attention away from the pain of suffering, give themselves a break from extreme distress, and focus on something meaningful. For example, think of all of the loving people in your life. Spend a few minutes exclusively on them and what they do to express their love. Study the scenarios in detail. Now consider how you feel; you are bound to feel a temporary release from your nightmare.

Use your creative ability to refocus on various activities, reclaim the great energy you dissipate on suffering, and use it in the wise exploitation of the need to replenish. There are literally hundreds of scenes, people, actions, and words that you can use as resources for shifting attention.

3. Discover what you can learn from suffering. At first glance, don't dismiss this lesson as irrelevant; it can make a big difference in your life. Go on a search (a good diversion strategy) for those who have written about their suffering and what they have learned from the experience. Compare their findings with your own. Are their learnings applicable to your circumstances? How would they deal with what you are going through?

Discover how suffering changes you and how you can find meaning in it. Be sure to read Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*. Your search to learn from suffering is guaranteed to bring you wisdom.

4. Seek those who love unconditionally and respond in all you do from a place of love. Openly share your suffering with those who love without conditions; they know how important it is to be fully present to the suffering of others and your need for a trusted listener. Release the full force of your suffering on them, a little at a time. The vast importance of a loving community cannot be overstated. If you live alone, you must be proactive and reach out. Connection is crucial to healing. Make a vow to give and receive love every day (make it a major objective). Send thoughts of love to others and accept the loving aid offered to you.
5. Practice the ancient technique of relieving suffering by living to give. For centuries relieving the suffering of others was shown to relieve the suffering of the giver; it holds true and is still practiced today. In short, choosing to develop the mindset of caring for and giving to others, inevitably will lead to relieving your deep pain. Never forget the immense power of thoughts. Committing to following through on a thought pattern of giving though hurting will bring dividends beyond measure. You have a purpose and it will transform your inner life in a way nothing else can.

In summary, the three greatest forces for relieving suffering are to (1) find a way to express your deep pain, (2) be willing to help others even as you are suffering, and (3) start your ongoing project of increasing your ability to love unconditionally. The big three have a long positive history of success in dealing with suffering from every imaginable source.