

Honor the Difference Between Necessary and Unnecessary Suffering

By Lou LaGrand

Suffering is an integral part of life. Yes, I know none of us like to admit this universal truth. Nonetheless, history and the most learned scholars make it abundantly clear that legitimate suffering finds its way into every life, and we can't prevent it from playing its role. There will always be aging, death, and other great changes.

On the other hand, unnecessary or self-imposed suffering abounds. In the past 30 years, I have seen it take over the grief process and cause untold damage in the lives of many of the bereaved. What is the difference between necessary and unnecessary suffering and what can we do with this knowledge?

In a nutshell, unnecessary suffering is self-generated. Our actions and beliefs, or a lack of them, heaps additional burdens on us as we cope with suffering that is a condition of existence. And, what can we do about minimizing then eliminating unnecessary suffering? Become aware of how we poison ourselves and add to the fire.

To begin with, let's go back to the first sentence in this article and reemphasize that gut-wrenching losses are a universal experience. No one gets a free pass. We all have to deal with them. One of the ways to eliminate unnecessary suffering is to accept certain losses. There isn't a counselor alive who won't tell you that many of their clients resist what simply should not and cannot be resisted. Loss and change will always occur.

It is critical, therefore, to change the old beliefs you have harbored that difficult loss and change experiences only happen to certain people, and by gosh not me. Why is it critical to accept suffering as a fact of life? Because now you will have to address the questions of Why? Why do we suffer? This exploration will lead you, as it should, to the search for meaning.

If we can find meaning in our suffering, as those who have been through the hell of great losses tell us, we can bear up to any loss the world has to offer. So make a diligent search for meaning; it will change your life and the way you look at suffering. It takes time, patience, and much energy to make this transcendent journey. But it will be well worth it.

Your specific goal is to take whatever narrow perception of reality you live in (we all live in a narrow perception of reality) and increase its dimensions. This means never stop learning, participating, and exploring the vast amounts of information that is out there about the huge complexity of the world, its mysteries, and the people in it. Specifically, pick the brains of the great minds, philosophers, theologians, and astronomers (yes, astronomers).

All of the above is a beginning to reduce what psychiatrist Carl Jung called neurotic suffering, which is suffering without a reason. You may also need to address additional sources of unnecessary suffering such as the beliefs that you are a victim, that if you are a good person you won't have to deal with big-loss suffering, and that life is always fair.

And, you will also have to deal with neurotic guilt. True cause and effect guilt is clear: you do something you know you shouldn't do and now you feel guilty. In neurotic guilt the huge amount of guilt borne is all out of proportion to the cause. There is no cause for this unnecessary suffering, except faulty reasoning. Here are examples: I should have taken him to a different emergency room; I should have gotten him to stop smoking or drinking; I should have taken her out of that hospital; if I had done this or that, he wouldn't have taken his life. The list is endless. Neurotic guilt is pervasive when grieving, which is why I give it special mention here.

Anyone can reduce self-imposed suffering, and in most instances eliminate it, because each of us has the power of choice to dump old beliefs and behaviors that were unfortunately thrust on us as we were growing up. Do everything you can to find new meaning, take responsibility for your choices, and see the world in a new perspective.

This still does not mean that you have to cozy up to suffering by any stretch of the imagination. But there is a reason for it. You have to find your reason. At the core of suffering great knowledge is found and you will raise your level of consciousness.