

Suffering during a time of crisis

When we examine the origins of the word 'suffer' we learn that it is Latin in origin. Closer examination of the word shows us that it means to bear or carry from below: suffering occurs when we are symbolically 'underneath' a burden; it is something we have to carry. This is why suffering is exhausting and challenging.

Suffering is a very difficult topic to discuss. We all feel anger and hurt and sadness (and a whole host of other emotions) when people try to tell us how to cope with suffering. It is with this in mind that we approach this topic gently and mindfully, even hesitantly.

Viktor Frankl was a Jewish psychiatrist who survived the concentration camps during World War 2. He emerged from this experience with a strong conviction that people can survive intense suffering with meaning and hope. His book *Man's Search For Meaning* is very worthwhile (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Man%27s_Search_for_Meaning). This is what I take from Frankl:

- **We choose how to respond to challenges, unfairness, and suffering.** Nobody can steal this away from us; we always retain the power to decide what attitude to adopt in any given situation. One of his famous quotes goes like this: *“Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.”* This means that whatever happens to us we have the internal-psychological freedom to choose to act or behave in a way that is true to our values, character, and hopes. For example, if you are a kind-compassionate person you can choose in every circumstance to remain kind-compassionate. In this way events do not have the power to rob us of the best parts of ourselves.
- **Suffering is the greatest test of our personality.** Suffering and adversity are inevitable. What seems to matter most is how we respond to the suffering. Frankl had a very simple formula to finding meaning in suffering. He asked himself *‘What is life asking me to do in this situation?’* Once we've found the answer to this question we need to act on the answer. Another helpful question might be *‘What is this event trying to teach me?’*
- Nietzsche is quoted as saying *“(a person) who has a why to live for can bear almost any how.”* Put another way, *‘A person who has a purpose and meaning to live for can bear almost any situation.’*
Purpose gives us a reason to continue living meaningfully. Purpose is the reason we believe we are here and it will allow us to push through some of the most intense suffering if we keep it in the forefront of our minds. We all have an individual **purpose** and we need to discover what that **purpose** is. On a collective level, COVID-19 presents us with the challenge of cultivating **purpose** around courage, compassion, kindness and determination; these qualities abound in the NHS. If we make these qualities our **purpose** (alongside our individual purpose) we will help the NHS, our colleagues, our friends and family, ourselves, and our patients get to the other side of this enormous challenge. Quoting Frankl again: *“Life is never made unbearable by circumstances, but only by lack of meaning and purpose.”*
- **Humanity often surprises itself by revealing its true greatness in the most surprising places.** It is so easy to collect negative evidence from the world around us.

In fact the challenges and adversities of life give us ample reason to overlook its beauty and meaning. Likewise, it is easy for us to spend enormous amounts of time finding fault in ourselves (in its most extreme forms it results in self-hate, self-doubt, and a profound sense of failure-shame). On the other hand we have the ability to show great kindness and courage in some of the most difficult situations. Find these moments in yourself and focus on them.