What Is Suffering?

“A great sense of loss—physically or mentally”
“What we are all trying to avoid”
“Repeated, uncontrolled pain, and the idea of a flare coming around the corner was sometimes worse than the physical pain”
“Losing a child because of drugs”
“Pain that controls your life”
“The absence of love”
“Defeated, beyond one’s control”
“Inability to find wholeness”
“Heartbreak and absence beyond understanding”
“Deep sense of worthlessness”
“Fear, hopelessness and pain”
“Pain that can’t be fixed”

Suffering

Severe distress that threatens the integrity of the person

Noah’s Chronic Pain and Suffering Principle

Adverse Selection

“Intensity of Chronic Pain—The Wrong Metric”

• 30 years of escalating opioid prescribing, no decrease in burden of chronic pain in the US
• Mis-applied the acute and end-of-life approach to chronic pain
• Intensity of chronic pain does not correlate with tissue damage
• Change in brain processing from pain matrix to emotion/reward

Adverse Selection

• Suffering reported as intensity of pain
• Treatment with opioids
  • Chemical coping
  • Blocking/distracting from insight
  • No work on meaning
  • Despair
Adverse Selection

- Co-morbidities with MH issues, chronic disease
  - Increased anxiety
  - Overwhelmed
  - Less insight
  - Higher intensity of pain
  - Increased risk of abuse of or addiction to controlled substances

A Path Forward

The Island of Opioids

Reduce pain related distress, disability and suffering.
Offer empathy, encouragement, mentorship, hope.

“Responding to Suffering”

Diagnosing and Treating

- Identify a problem and propose a treatment to restore health and normal function
  - Tests, referrals, procedures, surgeries, meds
  - Do something!
- May lead to frustration or sense of inadequacy in managing chronic pain
- Our own emotional reactions may intrude
- Distancing
  - More referrals
  - Longer appointment intervals
  - Blame the patient

Responding to Suffering

Turning Toward

- Recognize suffering
- Ask for the story
- Be present
- Honor their experience
- Recognize their strength
- Be authentic
- Humility
- Non-abandonment
- Spirituality
- Connection
- Loyalty
- “Sustained compassionate engagement”

Refocusing and Reclaiming

- Help them to access sources of strength and resiliency
- The things that are important
- Redefine goals focused on enhancing meaning
- Take back control
- Learn from the illness
- Integrate their values
- Acknowledge ambiguity
- Challenge self-perceptions
- Hope

What Responding to Suffering Requires

- Engagement as a whole person
- Emotional intelligence
- Self-awareness
- Sense of purpose
- Humility
- Patience

“Those who have a why to live, can bear with almost any how.”

Viktor E. Frankl
Man’s Search for Meaning
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