



CENTER FOR SPIRITUALITY  
AND AGING

891 South Walnut Street Anaheim, California 92802 Phone (714) 239-6267 Fax (714) 635-4819  
"Let the Spirit Soar" Web Site: [www.spiritualityandaging.org](http://www.spiritualityandaging.org) Email [dkoepke@frontporch.net](mailto:dkoepke@frontporch.net)

## **Aging with Spirit: Perspectives on Suffering**

Donald Koepke, Director

Why do some people *age gracefully*, while others do not? Why do individuals differ so greatly when it comes to their ability to *roll with the punches*? How is it possible for one client to be content and engaging despite significant physical challenges, while another in relatively good health is constantly grumpy and discouraged? One essential reason is the way each person deals with the reality of suffering in life.

### **A matter of meaning**

No one likes to suffer. After all, to suffer is to experience continual, undeserved pain of the body, mind and spirit. To suffer is to feel pain that will not go away. Yet suffering, we must realize, is in the eye of the beholder. A client can be in pain without suffering, just as another can suffer without being in physical pain.

People who feel pain but do not suffer are unsurprised by pain. They recognize pain is a part of life. A reminder they are alive. Looking at their present situation, these individuals may not find meaning or purpose at the moment, but they expect to discover it someday. They understand they are human—vulnerable, finite, imperfect.

In contrast, people who suffer without physical pain believe they deserve a pain-free life. To their way of thinking, any limitations should be managed, controlled, manipulated and mastered. These individuals cannot easily find meaning or purpose in their present situation, because the pillars upon which they built their lives have been threatened or destroyed. They are in spiritual distress—hurting in the soul, as well as the body.

Viktor Frankl, the noted Viennese psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, coined this formula:

*D=S-M, or despair (D), the ultimate experience of suffering, equals suffering (S) without (minus) meaning (M).*

Frankl quoted Martin Heidegger, the German existential philosopher, when he noted that a person with a *why* to live can deal with any *how*.

## **Responses to pain**

We all suffer, but to varying degrees. It's what we do with our pain that separates people who age *spiritedly* from those who do not.

Health and wellness professionals would do well to consider how their clients respond to pain. Are these older adults able to transcend pain and suffering to see value and purpose in life? Do they realize they can find meaning in spite of pain, and sometimes even because of it?

Unfortunately, one way health and wellness professionals may handle their clients' suffering is to run from it. That's because, to deal with the suffering of another, professionals must often see and confront their own pain, vulnerability and limitations. Among those who have yet to come to terms with their pain or do not see its value, personal issues can close them to their clients' pain and suffering.

Another way health and wellness professionals may deal with their clients' suffering is to try to *fix* it—as if they have the power to remedy another's suffering. The truth is no one can fix another's pain. If Frankl is right and D=S-M, only the sufferer can end his or her despair, because only he or she can judge this suffering to be meaningful, valuable and worthy. Sufferers need companions who will listen to them and support them while they are suffering. Most do not need answers.

## **The gift of growth**

My personal trainer once said the same words my high school track coach used to shout many years ago: "No pain, no gain." This cliché might be controversial in a senior wellness/fitness setting, but it is true in spiritual caregiving.

Growth comes when life is challenged. As traveling companions of the client's spiritual journey, struggle, uncertainty and even pain are to be expected, as meaning, ideas and beliefs are questioned and expanded.

## **Recommended reading**

Albom, M. *Tuesdays with Morrie*. New York NY: Doubleday, 1997

Byock, I. *Dying Well: The Prospect of Growth at the End of Life*. New York NY: Riverhead Books, 1997

Eiesland, N. *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*. Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1994

Frankl, V. *Man's Search for Meaning*. New York NY: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1959

Frankl, V. *The Will to Meaning*. New York NY: A Meridian Book, 1988

Kurtz, E. and Ketcham, K. *The Spirituality of Imperfection*. New York NY: Bantam, 1992

Lustbader, W. *Counting on Kindness*. New York NY: The Free Press, 1991