Why a meaningful life is impossible without suffering

Pain makes sense from an evolutionary perspective. What's puzzling is why so many of us choose to seek out painful experiences. By Stephen Johnson, June 24, 2022

The writer and philosopher Alan Watts once posed a thought experiment: Suppose you could dream any dream you could imagine, night after night, for as many years as you wanted.

Odds are you’d start off by pursuing fun and simple pleasures, like Bill Murray’s character in Groundhog Day. But that would inevitably get old. At some point, you’d start ceding control over your dreams because you’d desire challenge, chaos, and, eventually, suffering.

In the end, Watts said, “You would dream the dream of living the life that you are actually living today.”

Watts’ thought experiment raises a question about how people derive meaning: Is it possible to live a meaningful life without suffering? To psychologist Paul Bloom, suffering and meaning are often inextricably linked.

“I think the way people think about meaning — our very notion of what a meaningful experience, or meaningful goal, or meaningful life is — is that it requires some degree of suffering, where suffering could be physical pain, it could be difficulty, it could be worrying, it could be the possibility of failure,” Bloom told Big Think.

**The lure of the negative**

Pain is evolutionarily useful for humans and other animals. It serves as an alarm system that trains us to avoid harm, whether it’s the burning sensation you feel when you accidentally touch a hot stove or the psychological discomfort you experience when you perceive rejection from your peers.

It makes sense that we experience pain. But what’s less obvious is why people pursue experiences that cause pain. Why do some people choose to do things like eat spicy foods, watch horror movies, compete in triathlons, fight in mixed martial arts competitions, or climb mountains?

**Chosen suffering**

In his book The Sweet Spot: The Pleasures of Suffering and the Search for Meaning, Bloom explores a handful of theories on why people choose to pursue experiences that are likely to include pain, and how the resulting suffering contributes to meaning and happiness.

One explanation for why people willfully incur pain is to enhance pleasure through contrast. Just as darkness is only possible because light exists, we experience pleasure against the backdrop of pain. In order to maximize the pleasure of an experience, you often need a big dose of its opposite. That’s one reason why a dip in the hot tub feels especially good after a frigid winter day, or why a beer tastes extra refreshing after eating a spicy dish.

Another explanation is mastery. We feel a sense of reward when we make progress toward our goals and perform tasks well. So even though a professional boxer, for example, is sure to feel pain in the ring, that pain is likely to be outweighed by the enjoyment of performing their mastered craft. That enjoyment is likely to come, in part, from the boxer entering a flow state, which activates the brain’s dopaminergic reward system.

More broadly, we seem to place greater value on accomplishments that require a lot of effort.

“If you were in such good shape that training for a triathlon was easy, it wouldn’t have much meaning for you,” Bloom told Big Think. “But the difficulty is part and parcel of things, part of what makes it valuable.”

Suffering can also provide us with a brief escape from the self. For example, the psychologist Roy F. Baumeister proposed that people who engage in BDSM are primarily interested in escaping from “high-level self-awareness” by temporarily embodying “a symbolically mediated, temporally extended identity.” Similar to a flow state, during which all of our attention and energy is focused on a single task, painful episodes seem to snap us out of our everyday self-consciousness and into something new.

Bloom was clear to differentiate between chosen and unchosen suffering. As in all of the examples above, chosen suffering can help us achieve different levels of pleasure and meaning. Unchosen suffering, such as chronic illness or the death of a loved one, might sometimes make us stronger in the long run or give us a sense of meaning, but it’s not necessarily good in and of itself.

“There’s no regular rule that bad things are good for you,” Bloom told the American Psychological Association.

**Happiness and meaning**

When people willfully choose to incur pain, the goal is usually to increase happiness or meaningfulness. These concepts are correlated — with research suggesting that happy people are more likely to report high levels of meaningfulness in their lives — but they’re not the same thing.

A 2013 study published in The Journal of Positive Psychology articulated some key differences between the two. Happiness, the authors wrote, is rooted in nature and centers on having our needs and desires satisfied. In contrast, meaning is more subjective and seems to depend largely on the culture in which we live.

Another difference centers on time. The study noted that our sense of happiness depends largely on the present moment, while meaningfulness involves us integrating the past, present, and future.

For example, drinking a cold beer after a hard day’s work might give us pleasure that briefly increases happiness, but it’s unlikely to give us meaning. Meanwhile, embarking on the long journey of raising kids will include plenty of moments of unhappiness, but for most people it gives life a deep sense of meaning.

Meaning may be hard to define, but it seems to be the reward we earn when we pursue things we value, even when the pursuit is difficult. As Theodore Roosevelt once said, “Nothing in the world is worth having or worth doing unless it means effort, pain, difficulty.”

They Say Suffering Will Make You Stronger—But It's Not That Simple

By Paul Bloom, Nov 29, 2021

Is suffering good for us? Does it make us better people, kinder and more resilient; does it give meaning to our lives?

It would be nice if it did, particularly since so many of us have been suffering these days. Around three-quarters of a million Americans have died of Covid, and those who loved them often didn’t get to say goodbye or hold a proper funeral. Millions have lost their jobs or their businesses, millions have had their life projects put on hold or derailed. There have been those trapped together who hate each other and others who essentially lived in solitary confinement. Even the luckiest experienced boredom, anxiety, and dread.

Many religious traditions see value in such suffering. Among other things, it is said to bring us closer to God. C.S. Lewis worried that we get too complacent and proud in our happiness; suffering wakes us up: “God whispers to us in our pleasures ... but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world. It removes the veil; it plants the flag of truth within the fortress of the rebel soul.” Some take this to extremes. William Henry Atkinson, the president of the American Dental Association, reportedly said, “I wish there were no such thing as anesthesia! I do not think men should be prevented from passing through what from passing through what God intended them to endure.”

I don’t think any modern-day psychologists would go this far, but some believe that great benefits can come from terrible experiences. Everyone has heard of post-traumatic stress; the alternative they advance is post-traumatic growth. As Richard Tedeschi, one of the founders of the theory, puts it, after experiencing traumatic events, “People develop new understandings of themselves, the world they live in, how to relate to other people, the kind of future they might have and a better understanding of how to live life.”

This surely happens some of the time, but there’s reason to be skeptical that this is a common psychological process. Most studies in the area explore people’s perception of how they reacted to trauma; there is less evidence for actual concrete changes. And a recent meta-analysis by Judith Mangelsdorf and her colleagues find that the same benefits said to occur after trauma also occur after major positive life events, and even when people have had nothing major happen to them, either bad or good. It may be that growth (or the perception of growth) just occurs over time; suffering has little to do with it. 2

But there is good news to be found in the psychological research. As George A. Bonanno discusses in his new book “The End of Trauma”, we are much better than we think we are at enduring traumatic experiences; resilience is the rule, not the exception. We will mostly make it through this experience unscathed. While there may not be a wave of communal growth after the collective suffering brought on by the pandemic, we won’t all get PTSD either.

And it gets better. To use Nicholas Nassim Taleb’s term, we are antifragile: “The resilient resists shocks and stays the same; the antifragile gets better.” Some degree of life suffering turns out to have modest positive effects. In one set of studies, subjects were given a list of thirty-seven negative life events—physical assault, death of a loved one, and so on—and tallied up how many they had experienced in their lives. Those seemingly lucky people who reported no such events turned out to have lower than average pain tolerance and higher than average tendency to catastrophize about stressful situations. (Importantly, though, those people with high levels of negative experience also showed the same pattern—there seems to be a sweet spot of intermediate suffering where we do best.)

There are similar effects for kindness. People who haven’t suffered much in their lives are less likely to agree with claims like “It’s important to take care of people who are vulnerable” and “When I see someone hurt or in need, I feel a powerful urge to take care of them,” and are less likely to donate to needy strangers.

Most of all, there is a powerful relationship between suffering and meaning. Individuals who say that their lives are meaningful report more anxiety and worry and struggle than those who say that their lives are happy. The countries where citizens report the most meaning tend to be poor ones where life is relatively difficult. In contrast, the countries with the happiest people tend to be prosperous and safe. The jobs that people say are most meaningful, such as being a medical professional or a member of the clergy, often involve dealing with other people’s pain. When asked to describe the most meaningful experiences of our lives, we tend to think about those on the extremes, very pleasant—and very painful. And we often choose pursuits that we know will test us—everything from training for a marathon to raising children—because we know at a gut level that these are the pursuits that matter.

Now, there is a profound difference between the struggles we choose—our children, our careers, our hobbies—and suffering which is unchosen and unwelcome. It is the suffering that we choose that affords the most opportunity for pleasure, meaning, and personal growth. But, still, unchosen suffering can spark change, and some have been liberated by the pandemic, choosing to leave unsatisfying work and seek out deeper, more challenging, pursuits.

There’s no getting around it: It would have been better if the pandemic had never happened. But we can take solace in a few things. Our suffering does not necessarily scar us, and can, for some, lead to increased reliance and kindness. And, for the lucky ones, it can be a source of meaning and purpose.