



HEPMP

HIGHER EDUCATION PAIN MEDICINE PROJECT

Strengthening Capacities for Higher Education of Pain Medicine in Western Balkan countries – HEPMP



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Institute
of Mental
Health
Belgrade
Serbia

Existential meaning of suffering

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Why suffering

The Book of Job



The Complaint of Job, William Blake (ca. 1786)

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Experience of suffering

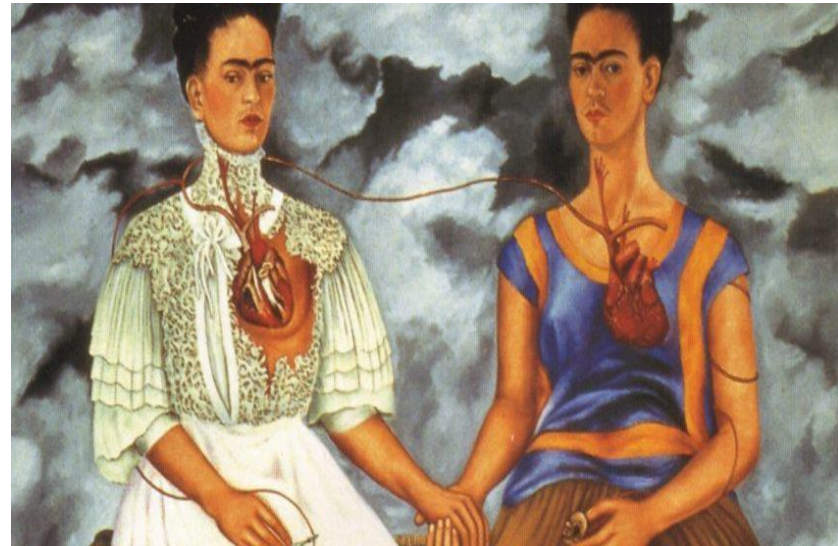
- A human response to tragedy, disaster, death, acts of violence, war, genocide
- Forms of suffering - disappointment, frustration, illness, loss, loneliness, identity crisis, emotional turbulence
- An authentic human feeling
- Suffering can not be avoided, but it is not the only way of life

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Types of suffering

- **Illness**
- **Dying**
- **Suffering imposed by other humans**
- **Suffering of the contemporary man**
- **Suffering of others**
- ***“My painting carries with it the message of pain” – Frida Kahlo***



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Four basic existential questions

- Death
- Isolation
- Freedom
- Meaning in life



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Death

- The most obvious, intuitively apparent ultimate concern (Yalom, 2011)
- Inevitable, cannot simply be put away
- Confronting death through severe, terminal disease, ageing, ‘autumn of life’, anniversaries, loss...
- Possible dramatic, positive transformations
- Reordering life priorities, decline of trivialities
- More honest communications, return to Nature, the beauty of being
- “Cancer cures psychoneuroses” (Yalom, 2012)
- “Pity I had to get sick in order to learn to live”

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Grief

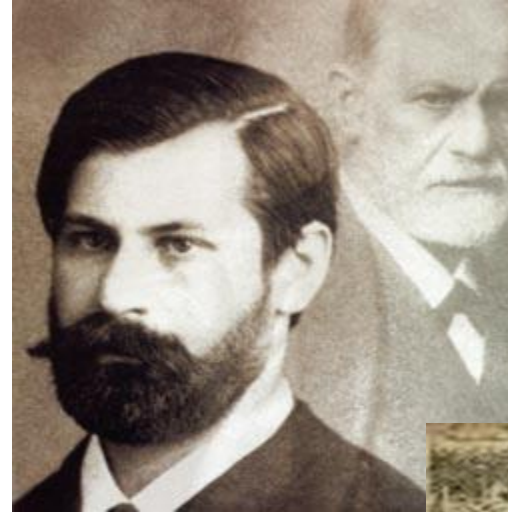
- **Response to a bereavement - loss of giving & receiving**
- **Broken attachment**
- **Acute stress response**
- **Prolonged/complicated grief – a distinct diagnostic entity in DSM – 5 (2013)**
- **About 7% of bereaved older adults develop the mental health condition of Complicated Grief**

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Normal sadness (grief) and depression

- Short term mood changes in all people
- Mourning and Melancholia (Freud, 1917)
- Empty external world or empty Ego (Self)
- Mourning and depression – fear and anxiety
- Anatomy of Melancholy (Robert Burton, 1621)
- Μελαγχολία (μέλας "black" and χολή "bile")



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‘The grief hath crazed my wits....’

(Gloucester)

Act 3, scene 4; King Lear. William Shakespeare

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Suffering (sorrow)

***“Give sorrow words:
The grief that does
not speak
Whispers the
o’erfraught heart”.***

Macbeth IV, 3



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Isolation

- **Intrapsychic isolation**
 - An old concept – Binswanger, Freud, Fritz Perls
 - Refers to separation from oneself
- **Interpersonal isolation**
 - Commonly experienced as loneliness
 - Variety sources of loneliness – lack of social skills, personality styles related to intimacy – schizoid, narcissistic, borderline
- **Existential isolation**
 - A more basic isolation
 - An unbridgeable gap between oneself and others, a separation between self and world
 - Experienced most keenly by patients facing death
 - At the time of dying one truly realizes that one was born alone into the world and must exit from the world alone
 - A final separation
 - Separation anxiety at birth (Otto Rank)

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Suffering and severe illness

- **Suffering is comprehensive, multidimensional and indivisible (Monforte-Royo et al, 2012)**
- **It is usually unnecessary in practice to distinguish psychological from physical suffering**
- **Suffering remains a hallmark of the severe illness experience**
- **The person with a severe illness may experience all width of suffering**
 - **Physical - i.e. pain, loneliness and isolation**
 - **Psychosocial - fear, anxiety, depression, despair**
 - **Spiritual - search for the meaning of life and suffering**

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Psychological suffering at the end of life

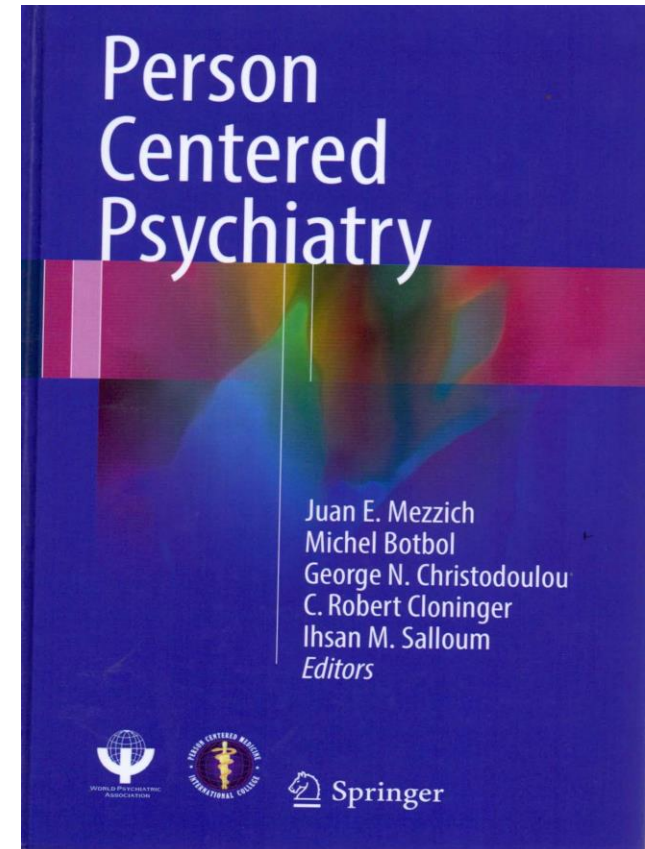
- **Clinically, persistent suffering at the end of life can include various dimensions:**
 - **psychological - fear of experiencing unbearable suffering, feeling alone, grief reactions**
 - **social - social isolation, witnessing the exhaustion of loved ones dealing with the illness**
 - **existential - loss of dignity, search for meaning in the experience of the disease, freedom of choice versus the loss of control, anticipation of death**
 - **spiritual or religious - spiritual distress; questioning one's belief in the afterlife, or the existence of God)**
 - **We deserve as much dignity in dying as we do in living (J. L. Borges, “The Angel”)**

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The suffering of others

- Can we really evaluate another person's suffering?
- Empathy – an important tool of the health care professionals
- To gain access to a patient's suffering - clinician must understand the person as a whole
- Taking into account patient's values, roles, the nature of his relationships, and the life course
- Each individual is unique
- Medicine for the person/ Person centred medicine



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Meaning in life

- **More individuals seek therapy because of concerns about purpose in life than therapists often realize (Frankl, 1987)**
- **K. G. Jung estimated that one third of his patients consulted him for that reason**
- **Choosing to be courageous or to be joyful or to transcend**
- **To focus on things outside the self for a great cause**
- **A sense of unity and oneness with Nature, and with God or humankind or both can give meaning to life**
- **The freedom to choose our way is a freedom that can never be taken away**
- **Even in situations of severe constraint such as a concentration camp, where all other freedoms are removed**

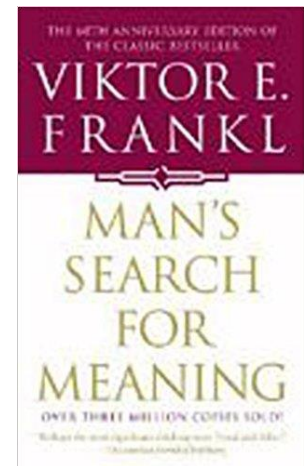
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Life has meaning under all circumstances

Freedom to find meaning



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H. sapiens – an unhappy primate

- **Stress a part of life since the beginning of time**
- **Modern man lives in the flame of technological progress**
- **H. sapiens – an unhappy primate confronted with growing number of micro and macro stressors?**
- **Traumatic experiences – wars, mass violence, terrorism, natural disasters**
- **Personal life events - traffic accidents, loss of a close person**
- **The age of mass media communications (internet, social network, twitter, face book, instagram)**
- **Rise of (pseudo)freedom In the maddening crowd of reality shows**
- **The age of globalization – post-truth and post-nationalism**
- **Increased suffering and loneliness**

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Meaning of suffering

- Life is justified only when it is passed in a continuous effort to expand its limits by overcoming difficulties and suffering
- The search for its meaning is an individual's unique challenge
- Giving suffering a positive meaning
- Finding meaning - primary motivation of all human beings
 - The road to change and growth is narrow and steep
 - Not easy but rewarding
 - Pain is the price of great gain
- Dostoyevsky: "There is only one thing I dread: not to be worthy of my suffering"

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Wisdom in suffering

- **Nietzsche and the problem of suffering:**
 - *In pain there is as much wisdom as in pleasure: like the latter it is one of the best self preservatives of a species*



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Physician assisted death Euthanasia

- The prescription and administration of life-ending medications – as a response to the extreme physical suffering of many people with terminal conditions such as cancer
- Consistent with physicians' obligations to relieve suffering
- Six EU countries and five US states have legalized some form of PAD
- Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg (Canada) have gone a step further
- People with psychiatric disorders eligible for physician assistance in ending their lives
- Depression, substance abuse, eating disorders, cognitive impairment, autism spectrum disorder
- Half of patients requesting PAD had personality disorders, including 27% with borderline personality disorders

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Physician assisted death, 2

- **Social isolation, interpersonal conflict, and socio-economic stresses - all potentially remediable**
- **Depression – hopelessness, helplessness**
- **Desire to end one's life is a common manifestation of the disorder**
- **Adoption of PAD for psychiatric disorders is likely to yield more harm than good**
- **Abuse of human rights movement?**
- **A psychiatrist should not prescribe or administer any intervention to a non-terminally ill person for the purpose of causing death (APA position statement)**
- **A need to exercise caution about embracing this trend (Appelbaum, World Psychiatry 17:2 - June 2018)**

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Concluding remarks

- Existential suffering is inevitable part of life
- Not our enemy but a “teacher”
- Provides unique opportunities for personal growth
- Physicians have a privileged role
- Helping patients to overcome pain (“Terrifying Lord of Life”)
- Find the meaning of suffering
- The meaning in the mystery of life

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The Decalogue

- Manifest of Italian doctors, 14th September 2016
 - The ten commitments against pain, an "Hippocratic Oath" for doctors of all specialties
1. I am a doctor and respect the Hippocratic Oath
 2. I have to treat **pain**
 3. I must take care of the **suffering** that comes from **pain**
 9. I have to share and promote the knowledge on **pain care**
 10. This is my commitment to improving the quality of life of people with **pain**

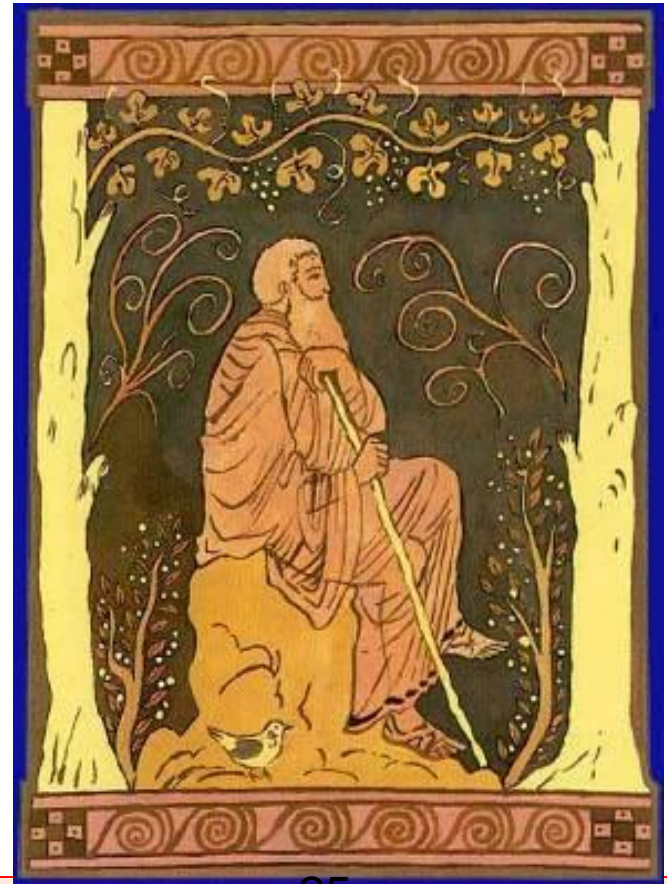
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Divine role of physicians

*Divine is the task to
relieve pain.*

Hippocrates



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