Abstract

The aim of the current article was to examine the meaning of suffering in drug addiction and the recovery process. Negative emotions may cause primary suffering that can drive an individual toward substance abuse. Drugs provide only temporary relief, and over time, the pathological effects of the addiction worsen causing secondary suffering, which becomes a motivation for treatment. The spiritual 12 step program of Narcotics Anonymous offers a practical way to cope with suffering through a process of surrender. This article is another step toward understanding one of several key factors that contribute to an addict's motivation for treatment.

Keywords: Suffering; drug addiction; motivation; meaning in life; Narcotics Anonymous; 12 step program.

1. Introduction

The question of what motivates addicts to recover from drug addiction is an essential issue in drug addiction recovery. One answer is that addicts recover when their lives
become unbearable. Drug addiction is a lifestyle accompanied by physical, mental and spiritual suffering for the addicts, their families and society (Gray, 2003). The perception of suffering is a subject of ongoing debate among researchers. Some claim that suffering is destructive and negative (Levinas, 1988). Others claim that suffering should be considered not only as destructive and damaging, but also viewed as a positive factor that could potentially initiate a positive process of self-change (Williams, 1969). The aim of this article is to examine the meaning of suffering in drug addiction and recovery from the perspective of existentialism, Buddhism and the 12 step program. Both existentialism and Buddhism view suffering as a spiritual phenomenon associated with meaning of life. Similarly, the 12 step program suggests practical ways to cope with addiction suffering through spiritual recovery which is closely associated with meaning of life. The meaning–centered approach, which includes freedom, choice and responsibility, is deeply rooted in existentialism, Buddhist philosophy, and the 12 step program and offers an alternative approach to coping with suffering.

The article is divided into five sections. The first deals with the definition of suffering as a multidimensional spiritual phenomenon; the second deals with spirituality; the third presents suffering as a spiritual phenomenon in existential and Buddhist philosophies; the fourth presents suffering as one of the causes of drug addiction and as a motivation for recovery; and the final section describes the drug addiction recovery process through the 12 step program.

2. Body

2.1 Suffering

Suffering is a universal phenomenon and part of the human experience
(Schopenhauer, 1958), and is defined as "a psychological reaction to a state of distress caused by a threat to the intactness of the individual’s sense of self (Cassell, 1992). Many researchers note the problematic nature of researching and defining suffering (Frank, 2001), resulting in numerous theological, philosophical and medical definitions. For example, Daniel Day Williams claimed that suffering is 'an anguish experienced as a threat to our composure, our integrity, and the fulfillment of our intentions' (Reich, 1987: 117).

Several researchers relate to suffering as a multidimensional spiritual phenomenon. Interaction exists between the various dimensions and suffering plays a part in all aspects of the human experience. Cassell (1992) referred to suffering dimensions as physical, psychological, social and spiritual, and claimed they are inseparable. Van Hooft (1998) maintained that suffering is a type of frustration resulting from the inability to fulfill the goal (telos) of the various dimensions of human existence. According to Van Hooft, the meaning of individual suffering is connected primarily to the meaning of life.

Only in recent decades, has therapeutic intervention begun to consider spirituality and meaning of life as personal resources for coping with emotional and existential suffering (Breitbart et al., 2004).

2.2 Spirituality

Several researchers note the problematic nature of defining and researching spirituality (Cook, 2004). Although conceptualizations of spirituality vary among theorists, some common conceptualizations do exist. These include a sense of meaning in life (Chen, 2006), values (Cook, 2004) and connectedness to a 'Higher Power' (Adams & Bezner, 2000).
The source of the search-for-meaning approach as a coping strategy with spiritual and existential suffering is rooted in existential and Buddhist philosophies (Breitbart et al., 2004). Both view suffering as a spiritual phenomenon associated with the meaning of life.

2.3 Suffering in Existential Philosophy

Existentialists are extremely occupied with finding meaning in human existence. Meaning of life fulfils a central role for individuals and may be found in all human experiences, including unavoidable experiences that involve suffering. Questions raised by existentialism relate to 'Who am I?' and 'What gives meaning to my life?' Or, as Nietzsche wrote, 'He who has the way to live, can bear with almost any how'. Nietzsche (1973) noted that it is not suffering that is impossible to bear, but rather meaningless suffering. Similarly, Frankl (1965) claimed that suffering has meaning if it generates change in the sufferer, as opposed to despair, which is meaningless suffering. This view of suffering as a spiritual phenomenon associated with the meaning of life is also grounded in Buddhist philosophy.

2.4 Suffering in Buddhist Philosophy

Similar to existentialism, Buddhism regards suffering as a spiritual phenomenon, an integral part of an individual’s daily existence (samsara) with no beginning and no end.

Buddhist philosophy views suffering as an emotional condition rooted in two primary causes; attachment (upadana) and craving (trsna). Attachment is an emotional state that leads to craving, and results from the desire to achieve the object craved (Burton, 2002). Craving is an attitude of possessiveness, emotional clinging,
and inability to accept change as reality. Coping is possible when an individual relinquishes craving and all forms of attachment resulting from lack of knowledge about the impermanence of the objects (avidya) they crave. Buddhism presents an optimistic, spiritual approach to coping with suffering and may provide the answer to the existential dilemma of suffering. Individuals are perceived as having the ability to choose and assume responsibility for their actions. Similarly, fundamental existentialism attributes great significance to free choice and responsibility as crucial elements of an authentic existence. Figure I below presents the conceptual model for this article.

![Conceptual Model](image)

**Figure I. Suffering as a Motivation for Treatment: A Conceptual Model**

2.5 *Suffering as Both a Cause of Drug Addiction and a Motivation in Recovery*

According to this model, **primary suffering** is defined as the range of an individual’s emotional deficiencies, needs and stresses motivating him toward substance abuse. **Secondary suffering** is defined as the unbearable suffering of drug addiction e.g., the 'hitting bottom' that forces one to reassess his life and seek help. Emotional deficiencies which cause primary suffering may motivate individuals to seek solace through substance abuse—a form of self-treatment. This assumption is based on the self-medication hypothesis (Khantzian, 1985). Relying only upon oneself, individuals
reject assistance from others and attempt to find their own way to alleviate psychological suffering. Over time, the destructive aspects of addiction cause secondary suffering—a multidimensional phenomenon affecting all aspects of one’s physical, emotional and social existence. Studies reveal that upon reaching this stage of unbearable suffering, addicts tend to seek external help (Nwakeze, Magura, & Rosenblum, 2002; Shufman, Witzum & Bar-El, 1991).

Based on these studies it may be assumed that at this stage, addicts realize (a) using drugs exacerbates, rather than balances their deficiencies through emotional regulation; (b) their suffering becomes unbearable and, (c) they are powerless to cope with their suffering alone. Therefore, one can assume that secondary suffering may motivate addicts to seek external assistance through a recovery program.

Motivation for treatment is a key factor in the initiation of, and involvement in treatment as well as in determining its outcome (Webster et al., 2006). Recovery is contingent upon the addict’s motivation to self-change and cannot be imposed upon them. According to this perception, motivation is a self-change approach expressed in: (a) knowledge that drug addiction is a severe problem, (b) readiness to seek help and, (c) willingness to participate in treatment (Nwakeze, Magura, & Rosenblum, 2002). Self-help programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA), known as 12 step programs, constitute a spirituality model for understanding the experience of addiction suffering and recovery (DuPont & McGovern, 1992).

2.6 Recovery from Addiction Suffering Through Spiritual Program

Narcotics Anonymous (NA) offers a spiritual program (The 12 step program) to address drug and alcohol addiction. The 12 step program recognizes the importance of
an individual’s suffering and surrenders and regards both as crucial for recovery. The recognition of suffering is a starting point in program assimilation (Ronel, 1995). Suffering is considered a powerful motivator for change when it 'becomes unbearable' (Ronel, 1995: 99). The NA program offers addicts a practical way to cope with suffering through surrender. Surrender is a positive process incorporating positive thinking that creates a genuine readiness for acceptance, without which no changes may occur. Dr. Harry Tiebout (1953), an early pioneer in integrating the AA philosophy with psychiatric knowledge of alcoholism, saw surrender as both a positive and creative state. In his view, the act of surrender sets in motion a conversion switch from negative to positive thinking and feeling--irrespective of any religious component (Tiebout, 1953: 59). According to Tiebout, the surrender reaction consists of both the act and state of surrender. He described the act as the moment when an addict’s subconscious forces of defiance and sense of grandiosity cease to function effectively. The state of surrender relates to the 'ego' characterized by immaturity and self-centeredness that pose obstacles in the recovery process. Surrender creates a sense of unity and tranquility that releases an individual from the compulsion to use drugs. According to Tiebout’s approach, 'Alcoholics may hit bottom many times, but unless they surrender, nothing significant takes place' (Reinert, 1992: 45). Samuel (1995) found that those who recovered from chemical dependence viewed surrender as the primary psychological and spiritual force for achieving abstinence and increasing their self-esteem. The act of surrender sets in motion a conversion experience that involves a radical self-change. Although there exists a disagreement over the definition and conceptualization of conversion, most agree that it involves a radical self-change in one's beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviors sometimes occurring as a response to emotional and lasting stress (Snow &
Machalek, 1984).

3. Discussion

According to the conceptual model of the current article primary suffering caused by negative emotions motivates an individual toward substance abuse. Secondary suffering, the result of drug addiction, is unbearable, and may be a motivation for treatment as well as a key factor in recovery. A Conceptual Model is presented in Figure II below.

![Figure II. Self-Change in Addiction Recovery: A Conceptual Model](image)

According to this model, drug addiction causes secondary suffering, characterized by despair, hopelessness and powerlessness. Powerlessness represents lack of control over drug addiction, the admission of which is an essential step in the recovery process leading to change in an addict’s omnipotent self-image. Surrender, which may be the foundation of the recovery process, refers to eliminating the individual’s subconscious feelings of grandiosity that cause him/her to resist recovery (Tiebout, 1953). The act of surrender is to set in motion a conversion experience involving a self-change including reorganization of one’s identity and meaning of life (Shibutani,
The 12 step program may provide an answer to the suffering which, according to Cassell (1992), includes three dimensions: distress, alienation and despair—and by attending social meetings that provide social support and sharing the message with another suffering addict (Step 12) the messenger may find meaning in life.

This article has some limitation. The present research has focused on the 12 step program which provides a pragmatic approach to coping with suffering through spirituality recovery. Despite reported empirical successes, the 12 step program is not a panacea, nor does it work for everyone. Any spiritual program directly emphasizing personal suffering and offering practical ways to end suffering may be appropriate.

4. Conclusion

The contribution of this article may be: (a) In presenting suffering as an internal motivation for treatment. A better understanding of the internal factors that influence one's motivation for drug addiction treatment is needed since studies indicate that individuals who are more motivated for treatment are more likely to experience success (Knight et al., 2000). (b) In presenting a different perception of suffering as a catalyst for self-change. This perception of suffering may encourage addicts to become active participants in their own lives rather than perceiving themselves as passive victims of life’s circumstances. Based on this article we may offer a number of recommendations for addiction practitioners: (a) Patient's suffering as a motivator for recovery should be routinely assessed and addressed in the recovery process; (b) Drug addiction recovery requires a more holistic approach which integrates the spiritual, psychosocial and physiological dimensions of the human entity; (c) A spiritual program directly emphasizing personal suffering and offering practical ways to end suffering may be appropriate for therapeutic intervention.
References


