

Does Suffering Have Meaning?



Catholic Cemeteries
Archdiocese of Vancouver

Purpose:

To explore Catholic teaching on the purpose and meaning of suffering.

Lesson Focus:

It is intended that students will...

- Discover that suffering has meaning and irreplaceable value.
- Critically engage with different views on suffering, and their ethical ramifications.

Lesson Plan		Duration: 60 minutes
Introduction	Small group discussion: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>It's OK to put down an animal if it's suffering. Is it OK to do the same to humans? Why or why not?</i> ➤ <i>If someone you loved was diagnosed with a terminal illness that you knew would involve a lot of pain, would it be OK to give them a lethal injection to avoid all that suffering?</i> ➤ <i>Is there any benefit to suffering? Can any good come from it?</i> 	
Guided Learning Steps	"Four Levels of Suffering" presentation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ See Teacher's Guide (attached) for a detailed script on delivering this presentation with accompanying pre-made PowerPoint and Prezi presentations provided. Alternatively, the script could be printed as a handout for small group reading. Worksheet to follow up: <i>Does Suffering Have Meaning?</i>	
Closure	Debrief worksheet <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ See <i>Does Suffering Have Meaning ANSWER KEY</i> 	

Materials (provided at rccav.org/educators)

1. *Four Levels of Suffering* presentation (PowerPoint/Prezi provided)
2. *Does Suffering Have Meaning?* worksheet, with answer key

Connections to CISVA Prescribed Learning Outcomes

- Defend that "we are made for relationship with God" is fundamental to our nature. (B2)
- Differentiate between Christian morality and alternative moralities in society. (A1)
- Define, with examples, reverence for life from conception to natural end. (F1)
- Argue that the Church has and always will defend life. (F2)
- Connect Catholic Social Teaching to respect for life. (F3)

Teacher's Guide



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Credit:

This lesson's content is based on Healing the Culture, a work of Professor Robert J. Spitzer SJ, President of Gonzaga University. Available from Ignatius Press.

Introduction

- **Small groups:** consider creating small groups in advance. It is beneficial for students to have meaningful discussion in small groups throughout the year, but bad habits may form in a group that has developed a negative "routine." Changing small groups every month, such that by the end of the year each student has seen as many different faces in the class as possible, can be a good way to keep small group discussion a fresh and worthwhile activity.

Guided Learning Steps

Background

The intent of the presentation is to motivate students to move from a Level 1-2 mentality to a Level 3-4 mentality.

- Levels 1 and 2 are intrinsically self-focused, resulting in destructive outcomes (assisted-suicide and euthanasia, for example)
- Levels 3 and 4 are selfless and deeply Christian, resulting in life-giving choices, consistent with Catholic teachings on the dignity of the human person and social justice.

Four Levels of Suffering presentation guide:

Each bullet point below corresponds to a matching bullet point on the PowerPoint/prezi:

Level 1: Epicurean

- Epicurus (341 – 240 BC) was an ancient Greek philosopher who believed that happiness was characterized by pleasure and destroyed by pain. For Epicurus, pleasure and pain were the measures of what is good and evil.
- If we operate in a Suffering Level 1 mindset, then we avoid pain and suffering at all costs because it interferes with experiencing pleasure. We seek to never be deprived of pleasures and possessions, and this leads to addiction and consumerism.
- Suffering becomes incompatible with happiness, and we see no meaning in it.
- Consequently, we consider quality of life "good" if we have an abundance of wealth and pleasure; whereas hardship, poverty, and illness make life no longer worth living. Moreover, we run the risk of passing this judgment on others: "So-and-so is old, cannot financially support himself, and has terminal illness – it would be better for everyone involved if he was euthanized."

Level 2: Ego-handicap

- If we believe that happiness consists of ego-gratification (increases in status, self-image, winning, control, popularity, and power), then when we get embarrassed or fail at something, or if we feel inferior compared to others, we can sink into depression.

- Moreover, when pain or illness handicaps us, or renders us dependent on others, life seems useless or meaningless.
- Quality of life, consequently, is measured by how well we function. This is a dangerous mentality, as it leads to the view that those who cannot function well (or “contribute to society”) are expendable – a person’s worth becomes equated with their usefulness.
- If we operate in a Suffering Level 2 mindset, then we develop a fear of suffering and hardship, because they inhibit our ability to achieve, or to “experience life.”

Level 3: Hero in the Making

- In level 3, we experience fulfillment by doing good for others and making the world a better place. If this is our mode of operation, then suffering gives us the opportunity to create beautiful qualities that transform our hearts, and those around us. The lives of the saints give constant witness and countless examples of this reality. St. Thérèse of Lisieux, for example, suffered terribly with tuberculosis, to the degree that when she was near death, her doctor exclaimed, “Ah, if you only knew what this young nun was suffering!”
- Yet, by allowing others into her vulnerability, St. Thérèse brought a depth of love and hope into the world, otherwise not possible.
- Quality of life, consequently, focuses on our ability to love others, and contribute to the common good. We are valuable because of who we are, not because of what we have or can do.

Level 4: Surrender to God

- St. Padre Pio said that “the economy of salvation has not changed.” What he meant is that the salvation of souls is purchased through self-sacrifice (Christ’s crucifixion), and that we can contribute to this saving work in a powerful way when we offer up our own suffering to God. Through our prayerful self-sacrifices, we call down extra graces for ourselves, our loved ones, and the whole world.
 - St. Paul to the Colossians (1:24): “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.”

Fr. Benedict Groeschel explains: “What is ‘lacking in Christ’s afflictions’? Absolutely nothing, and Saint Paul is very aware of this. Yet he is also very aware that God wants the ultimate salvation of all to be (at least in part) the work of all, and so this great saint rejoices in the ability to suffer in this life and in the next, to join his little sufferings to the great sufferings of Jesus, to play his role in God’s ongoing work of redemption” (p.56).
- God therefore uses suffering to lead us to the surrender of faith. It becomes an opportunity for spiritual and emotional growth, and in a very practical way can change lives. As Jesus said to St. Faustina, “You will save more souls through prayer and suffering than will a missionary through his teachings and sermons alone (n. 1767).”
- Quality of life, consequently, is derived from our unlimited worth as children of God. Every human being, therefore, has the highest dignity and value, because we are made in His image, and invited to share in His divine life, and no terminal illness or degree of physical or mental handicap can take that dignity away.

Closure:

Does Suffering Have Meaning? ANSWER KEY

- Focus on the reasoning that students used to both identify and re-word each quote.
- The answer key is merely a springboard to provide suggestions on how to re-word each quote to reflect a level 3-4 worldview. There may be many good answers here, and student input should be welcomed and celebrated.

Ideas for Extension and Extra Resources:

- **Curriculum resource:** Principles & Choices, by Camille Pauley and Robert J. Spitzer, S.J., Ph.D. Available from www.principlesandchoices.com
- **Free printable handouts on the Four Levels of Suffering and Quality of Life:** <https://healingtheculture.com/learn/pdf-downloads/>