

[This article is not meant to be the final statement on suffering, but a start on an open question, “What are the roots of suffering?” It organizes 25 distinct root causes into four categories.]

The Roots of Suffering

For every thousand hacking at the leaves of evil, there is one striking at the root. – Henry David Thoreau

I have decided to declare a war on needless suffering. As a child it never made sense to me that we lived in comfort while others suffered horribly. As an adult, I understand some of the political, economic, organizational and psychological roots of suffering, yet standing back from it all, it still seems absurd and unreal. But what seems most unreal is that many of us have learned to tolerate it completely.

Strategies for the War

If I am going to wage war, a strategy is needed. My initial strategy is this: Since there are easily ten thousand life-destroying problems, let us seek out the roots of the problems. Henry David Thoreau put it well: “For every thousand hacking at the leaves of evil, there is one striking at the root.” My only difficulty with his quotation is that it implies that there is only one single root. Another part of my strategy is to try to develop “a solution that generates other solutions.” In other words, I combine a set of high-leverage concepts into a process that creates new solutions as needed.

Let me explain why I insist on striking at the roots. Picture a volunteer representing each life-destroying problem lining up at your door, to ask for your donation or volunteer time to assist them in their cause. Hunger, terrorists, AIDS and a dozen other infectious diseases, the rainforests, campaign finance reform for a special-interest dominated political system, the refugees from 50 different wars, three dozen crippling genetic diseases from muscular dystrophy to lupus, the cause of prisoners of conscience, people who have lost a limb to landmines that have been left after a conflict, people whose immune systems have been destroyed by radiation or chemicals that have leached into their water, the homeless, and so on! The line of people wanting your time or money stretches into the distance.

At some point you close the door to these requests. You may close it right away, secure in the belief that you’ve paid your taxes so your government will handle all these problems. Or you may close the door when you have given all that you have, and have become overwhelmed and sickened by the futility of there never being enough.

What significance would seeing a list of all the root of suffering have for you? Would you welcome the opportunity to get to the roots? Before presenting such a list, I urge you not to read the list only in terms of their impact on the world. Instead, consider how *you* have been repeatedly victimized by these roots throughout your life. Also, unless you are the rare individual you’ve been an accomplice of these roots of suffering; you’ve been an instrument of harm to others. In sum, your life is intimately involved

with these roots. If you would deny this, or merely shrug it off as something that doesn't concern you, it may be due to ignorance or pride, two roots of suffering which blind people to their actions. Don't be duped: these roots are your sworn enemies.

A third part of my strategy is to think in terms of a "Code of Life," a set of behaviors and methods that we must master for survival and happiness. One way to look at humanity's situation is that we learn the code of life in pieces from many sources: our parents, teachers, peers, self-help books, our religions, television, other media, and the culture. The situation is confusing and inefficient for several reasons: 1) These sources conflict with each other on essentials. 2) Parts of the code are always being updated, for example, medical discoveries regarding diet, exercise and specific maladies. 3) The reliability of the sources and updates is often in question. 4) Like computers speaking different languages, people are operating with different versions in different "languages" creating conflicts and communication difficulties. 5) Most people seem to have at least a few gaps in essential knowledge. Given enough time, they will eventually suffer when that missing piece of knowledge is needed. 6) More frequently, we have the knowledge but don't apply it consistently, and so we suffer as if we were deficient in the knowledge.

Although this "Code of Life" perspective reveals some of the root problems, notably ignorance, I introduce it here mainly to help us define what a high-leverage solution might look like. First, I want to define the solution *on the level of individuals*, both because action begins in individual minds and because of the modern tendency toward individualism. Second I choose to define the solutions in terms of specific *behaviors, skills and methods* because these are objective and teachable. They must be specific behaviors and methods, not just general pronouncements. One example of a general pronouncement is to say that the answer to suffering is to be a good Christian or Muslim, or Hindu, etc. In general I agree, but being a good Christian, Muslim, Hindu, etc., each involves a long list of specific behaviors, attitudes, beliefs and things to avoid. It is the specifics of these lists, and not the all-embracing label, which interests me. (Blaming suffering on "evil" is likewise too easy, vague and useless.)

Therefore, as you read the following list, avoid the tendency to look for a single root problem. Also, don't dismiss some roots as too obvious, too raw, or too esoteric. Finally, please avoid the urge to dismiss a focus on suffering as "focusing on the negative." Otherwise all surgeons and law enforcement officers who dedicate their entire careers to removing sources of suffering could simply be labeled as "focusing on the negative" too.

In fact, I see a War on Suffering as merely an attempt to extend the surgeon's mission. Based on observation (diagnosis) and reasoning, it could reduce suffering, save lives, and restore normal function, so that people have a chance to live a more meaningful life.

Root problems

I initially wanted to list the root problems in order from those that seem to cause the most suffering to those that cause least. But since they often work together or overlap, it wasn't really feasible. Nevertheless, since there are over twenty roots, some form of classification would help with understanding and retention. The following framework seems quite useful:

Perception → Caring → Understanding what to do → Action

In other words, first we must notice suffering, then care about it, then understand it, then act. Suffering is thus seen to be caused by a malfunction at some stage in the process of relating to changes in our world. The four stages above, can be rephrased as questions:

Do I notice? → Do I care? → Do I understand what to do? → Can I act effectively?

What follows is a loose grouping, since roots can have impacts at different stages. Greed, for instance, can so consume our attention that we fail to perceive other's suffering. In this case it is a problem in perception (stage one.) But if we are consciously aware of other's suffering yet don't act because we are greedy for our own pleasure, we have in effect made a decision to care about ourselves and not others. In this case, greed would be a problem that affects caring (stage two.) Greed can also affect thinking (stage three) if we are in such a hurry to get back to our own pleasure that we hastily choose an attractive but ineffective idea for action. And greed can affect action (stage four) if we are in such a hurry to enjoy ourselves that we help others in a slap-dash half-hearted way. Nevertheless, despite the fact that the same root of suffering can act at different stages, I think it's worthwhile to maintain the following loose classification and to put the root in the stage in which it seems to act most frequently.

Perception *What roots block clear perception?*

Information overload, and a lack of skill at identifying the critical things to address, the current priorities.

Distorted information. This included propaganda and hype from: corporations seeking profits, non-profits seeking donations, politicians seeking power, or prejudiced persons just putting forth their world view—but these have their roots in greed, fear or ignorance.

Sheer miscommunication. Simple misunderstandings.

Blind acceptance of distorted information, especially from authority figures. A failure to do critical thinking or any thinking at all.

Insensitivity to our invisible and complex environments. Animals have the senses to detect changes in their environments: For instance, they can see or hear predators coming. They can smell which plants are edible. Birds have the instinct to migrate when winter is coming. Humans originally were on the same footing, but eventually some of their life-support systems grew invisible and complex. For instance, unless we live in isolation on our own self-sufficient farm, we are part of a global economy and no one has the sense organs, the “natural equipment” to detect or predict a depression or job layoff (equal to a sudden economic winter), a criminal (equivalent to a predator), or a sudden attack (from a terrorist or military enemy.) So the root of some suffering is that some of

our life-support systems have become complex and large, and invisible to our five senses. Our information sources and rational minds can only help us make short-range predictions at best.

Rigid, intolerant beliefs and behaviors; nonacceptance of others' differences. These may stem from intolerant religious beliefs or interpretations of these beliefs, or from intolerant cultural assumptions.

Pride—But what is pride behaviorally? Often it manifests itself as a conscious decision not to use new information to modify a previously decided behavior. This may stem from a desire to be seen by others as strong or immutable, which in this case has its root in a desire to be accepted by others or oneself. In other words, we are afraid of looking stupid and so don't want to reveal our ignorance. But another form of pride ignores new information because one has *decided*, once and for all, that no further knowledge or self-work is necessary. The thinking might be: "I'm an adult. I know the basics. I don't need to learn or change. Either others must change to suit me, or I won't participate."

Caring *What interferes with caring?*

A narrow circle of active caring. Many people only actively care about themselves, their family and friends. A small circle of active caring sometimes results in exploiting the people outside the circle to benefit those inside the circle. At other times a small circle results in tolerating evil done to those outside the circle, either actively or through unjust structures. Some people who only care about their personal happiness may harm people or use them as a means to an end. Many organizations, especially for-profit corporations, also have a narrow circle of caring. Their management and stockholders may only care about their employees as a means to achieving profits.

Greed as the short-sighted quest for pleasure. If we keep eating more ice-cream than our bodies can handle, we'll eventually suffer stomach aches, and in the long term we'll suffer the ill health and social consequences of being overweight. If we seek sex or anything else not in moderation, it leads to suffering in others or ourselves. For the simple physiological reason that we get used to any level of stimulus, the exclusive pursuit of pleasure inevitably results in either addiction or a depressed "washed out" state. For example, the third candy bar doesn't taste as good as the second which doesn't taste as good as the first.

Misplaced desire (and sometimes greed) for the symbols of our emotional needs. Women more than men might see a big house as a symbol of emotional security. Men might be more likely to see power and promotion as symbols of acceptance. Sex can be a symbol or substitute for intimacy or love. TV, videos and fiction take the place of real relationships. People who have been neglected as children may seek fame or notoriety to compensate for this early deprivation. We can spend a tremendous amount of time and money on the symbols: clothes and makeup, cars and the latest technological gadgets, degrees and gold medals, and feel empty when we attain them. Not only that, but in

seeking these empty symbols we often neglect to do some actions to maintain our health, relationships and society.

Incidentally, while pain is a natural consequence of overindulging natural desires (food, sex, too much playing of sports, etc.), there is no satiation of symbolic desires. You can always want more money or power or fame, and there is no point at which your body kicks in to tell you that you've had too much, as in the case of food, exercise, or sex.

Unrealistic expectations of oneself and others. While these can distort perception, expectations are like unconscious desires. They sometimes override our caring for others. These can have their source in one's upbringing, religion, or culture (which is in part created by corporations and organizations that have their own agendas.)

Understanding What to Do *What interferes with understanding?*

Misunderstanding involves poor quality thinking. There are many kinds: One category of poor-quality thinking involves logical fallacies, simple mistakes in logic. For instance, if most people in American prisons are black males, some people take that to mean that most black males are criminals.

A second category involves rationalization, one-sided thinking, or end-biased thinking. In other words, you want to make something happen or make something believable to yourself or another, and so you consciously or unconsciously select only the facts, attitudes, and arguments that support what you've already decided on. (The root: greed for the preferred end.)

Another kind of poor-quality thinking involves making untested, erroneous assumptions. One of these is a belief that there is one single root problem that is at the bottom of everything—and therefore one simple, total solution. Just as we need more than one vitamin or one kind of food to keep our bodies healthy, we have to maintain *many* life-support systems: the economy, the environment, the political system, our bodies, our minds and our vital personal relationships.

Short-range thinking, in other words, failure to look far enough ahead. Even some people who care only for themselves neglect their long-term welfare. They might not take care of their health, or fail to plan for their retirement. Similarly, even people with a broad circle of active concern may cause problems by taking only short-term actions.

Short-term emotional override of reason in individuals. Despair, anger, jealousy, lust, and mob dynamics can override critical thinking. This can result in crimes of passion, or violence that can cause permanent destruction to people or relationships.

Thinking that uses incomplete or distorted mental “maps.” We don't respond to the real world, we respond to our understanding of the real world. In Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) this understanding is called a mental map. NLP focuses on the

distortions and deletions that we make in our mental map of the world. In other words, we often oversimplify or distort situations through assumptions and biases. This is similar to the computer dictum “garbage in, garbage out” but it’s actually: good information in; good information scrambled by our distortions; mistaken actions out.

Thinking using old “maps.” The nature of thought is to take snapshots of situations, in other words, thinking uses static representations. Inherently, our judgments of the world become false when we fail to update them as the situation changes.

Thinking using incorrect or insufficient data. This includes a failure to exert enough effort to collect and check the data required to do quality thinking. Although much physical suffering from illness and disease has at its roots is an “act of God,” the remedies for many illnesses exist in nonwestern medical traditions. Ignorance of them, or failure to seek them out are secondary factors.

Another category involves seeking a minimally satisfactory solution, rather than a really good solution or optimal one. Given that most real systems are subject to entropy and decay, a minimally adequate solution soon becomes an inadequate solution. This often happens when people decide to exert as little effort as possible.

Action *What blocks effective action?*

The desire to be accepted by others. As mentioned above, the desire to be accepted is a root of one kind of pride. It’s also what causes people to ignore their consciences and sometimes follow leaders who harm others. On the other hand, the desire to be accepted by others spurs a lot of donations and volunteer work for charities which we may not really care about. We just don’t want to be seen as selfish. This desire to please may stem from an unconscious understanding that if we are not accepted by others, we will be ostracized by them, causing us mental or physical suffering. Wanting to be accepted is a valid desire, but it can go too far.

Digging deeper, another root of the desire to win people’s acceptance might stem from low self-love caused by parents who didn’t give unconditional love, but only gave it conditionally (that is, *if* their child obeyed, *if* their child were smart, *if* their child were pretty...)

Unequal distribution of power and resources. People will always be unequal in intelligence, health and talents. Even if we someday could create genetically equal offspring, accidental factors would lead to unequal power. As an illustration, all players of a Monopoly game start equal, but chance and strategy always lead to a power imbalance.

Avoidance of one’s duty. People shirk their responsibilities. Some of these duties are merely social, but failure to perform other duties causes our life-support systems to become weaker and unable to sustain as many people.

Lack of faith in arithmetic and consequences, in other words, lack of faith that small impacts add up. In the face of large, powerful institutions people feel disenfranchised and don't believe that their vote, their voice or their buying decisions make a difference. Equal in damage to the belief that our good actions don't add up is the belief that our contributions to problems are negligible. But air pollution, toxic waste, incivility and other negatives do add up, eventually causing significant suffering. But in the words of Stanislaw Lec: "No snowflake in an avalanche feels responsible."

The organizational life cycle—a root cause of bureaucracy. People don't solve all their problems individually but create a host of government, for-profit and nonprofit organizations to solve some of their problems. While for-profit businesses face healthy competition and a survival of the fittest situation, government departments and nonprofit organizations typically go through a life cycle in which they grow increasingly bureaucratic, bloated and inefficient. These organizations and government agencies then become more dedicated to their own survival and welfare than they are to treating and eliminating the problem. (Corruption, while related, has its roots in greed, already mentioned.)

Not root causes, but still deserving of "dishonorable mention"

Unjust political and economic structures. People often suffer as a result of imbalances of power and no-win situations created by unjust political and economic structures. But it is the complacency of people who have the power to change the structure but don't who are at the root of the suffering.

Immaturity and inexperience are often sources of personal suffering, but any suffering they cause may be considered to be necessary and unavoidable since we are all born immature and without experience. But if someone else who is more mature and experienced cares enough to watch over and guide the immature, much seemingly unavoidable suffering can be avoided.

Inattention to the present moment. Living in the past or future. This is similar to the root called "Insensitivity to our invisible and complex environments." The difference is that we *do* have the equipment to detect changes in our environment, but we just aren't using it. The roots of daydreaming and inattention can go back to pleasure (fantasy), fear, etc.

Over-centralization. (This is related to bureaucracy, mentioned above.) When the decision-making body is located many layers of organization from the source of the problem, suffering can be prolonged while data is collected, weighed and processed, and while information about the problem passes through the chain of command. Later, once a decision has been made to address the problem, there is yet another delay as the solution passes down the chain of command.

Overpopulation is a multiplier of problems, such as pollution and ethnic wars but can it be considered a source of suffering in itself? My guess is that most people *would* consider the creation of a child irresponsible if there were not the means to feed, care for

and educate the child. If the child is created without a reasonable likelihood of support, I'd say that whatever prompted the pair to conceive the child is a source of suffering. So overpopulation is not the root. The root depends on the people involved. It could stem from people's sexual desire, romantic notions of motherhood, or the fear of growing old without having any offspring to care for them.

Boredom. Boredom seems to have a combination of roots. First, anyone whose circle of caring extended beyond themselves can find plenty to do. And even the self-absorbed who are willing to exert effort can often find things to do. A third root of boredom is the psychologically valid need for stimulation.

An imbalance of perception, caring, understanding and action. The phrase "a bull in a china shop" usually describes a person who has too much strength (ability to act) and not enough sensitivity. Conversely, someone who has great sensitivity to the world's problems or the problems of others, but no ability to act, suffers from over-sensitivity.

Testing the List for Completeness

I can think of three tests for the completeness of this list: First, analyze historical events that produced major suffering. Second, analyze your own personal suffering, both daily suffering and major events in your past that you regret. Third, analyze the lives of people you personally know who seem to be suffering intensely.

I invite any additions or improvements in the list. Rather than waiting for refinement, I think it better to use the list to move toward action. After all, people are suffering.

Toward Strategic Solutions — How to Use the List of Roots

I've listed twenty-five root causes and six related causes of suffering. This is still too much for people to grasp and apply easily. So I organized most of the roots of suffering into four categories: Failure to perceive, failure to care, failure to understand, and failure to act. Nevertheless, I believe that once people begin to reflect on their own lives, they will see that for them, a much smaller set of roots play major and repeated roles in their lives.

To see if I'm right, and to use the list in your life, you might begin noting the problems and suffering that you experience, and also the problems and suffering of those close to you. Then, start to analyze the problems and suffering to determine the roots. This should give you an idea of how best to address the problem or suffering. From there you can set a goal using the *Goal or Dream Sheet*, or get the help you need to address the problem or source of suffering.

Finally, some suffering and loss will always be part of life on Earth. Our goal should be to eliminate suffering that is extreme and gratuitous.