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## Psychological Well-being and Dignity

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*“Not until the creation and maintenance of decent conditions of life for all men are recognized and accepted as a common obligation of all men and all countries - not until then shall we, within a certain degree of justification be able to speak of mankind as civilized”.*

Albert Einstein, 1945

### A note on suffering and dignity

Suffering, pain, loss...all around. Victims of disaster, hundreds and thousands of them, young and old, struck by unexpected..... They look for solutions, search for something, for somebody capable of assisting them and providing relief. Eyes –wide open, full of disbelief, anxiety, shock. Minds distracted, souls hurt. Their looks express their unspoken words. Could you help? Is there hope? Can anyone help?

How to express that I care? That I cannot remove the causes of distress, but I want them to know that I care. How can one put into words the deep-rooted wish to comfort them, to help.

Yet, what to say to a child who has just lost his leg? To a mother who lost a child? Is there a comforting word in those situations?

What is the meaning of psychological assistance? Long-term psychotherapy? No, in the majority of cases, especially when one has to deal with a large numbers of those affected by a disaster.

I learned from experience that many victims of disasters might benefit from a simple action; a friendly hug, a bit of empathy, time to listen, to understand; they benefit from support to their own coping, having someone there to feel that they are not alone, left to bouts of fate.

What is it that makes those acts helpful? What do they convey to the victims? Surely, that they are worth someone’s time and attention, that they deserve to be cared for, that they are respected not because they possess or know, but simply because they are human beings.

Most important, those acts help them to preserve their human dignity in the worst of situations.

I strongly believe that appreciation of another human being’s worth and respect for his dignity is the best way to his empowerment. Having been empowered, that individual is more likely to surmount the challenges he is facing.

Successful crisis intervention is about conveying to a person that he is capable of overcoming the life’s difficulties and that he deserves a better life.

From the point of a provider of psychosocial assistance, such acts, to be effective, require genuine altruism, empathy and appreciation for fellow human beings dignity.

## Self-respect and dignity

Self-respect is undeniably something of great value. Perhaps those who lack it know best: to lose respect for oneself and then struggle to regain it, to be robbed of one's dignity and to try to live without it, to have to fight to maintain a sense of one's worth in a world that denies it,– to live like this is to be painfully aware that a strong and confident self respect is vital to the ability to live a satisfying, meaningful, flourishing life.

The significance of self-respect is not chiefly a matter of an individual's psychological health: it is something of profound moral importance. For Aristotle and Hume the worth of persons is grounded in the quality of their character, and only the virtuous deserve the appropriately favourable view of themselves. By contrast, Kant maintains that self-respect is something that *all persons*, regardless of character, *deserve* and *ought to maintain*. One of his formulations of the supreme principle of morality "Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end" (Kant's second formulation of the Categorical Imperative) is widely regarded as the preeminent statement of the principle of respect for persons, the simple, but powerful idea that all persons as such must be respected. It is also regarded as Kant's major contribution to our understanding of self-respect. This principle declares *that we have not only a moral duty to respect others, but also a moral duty to respect ourselves, which requires us to act in certain ways and forbids us from acting in other ways*. As various human rights declarations affirm, the equality of human dignity is taken to be the basis of the equal moral rights that all persons have as persons, independently of social law, custom, conventions, and agreement.

Respect for oneself is generally regarded as the appreciation of worth, a kind of worth that is unearned, invariable, and inalienable, often called dignity, as opposed to a kind of worth that individuals earn which may be called "merit". The grounds for dignity are variously said to include a person's intrinsic nature (as a person, an autonomous agent, a moral agent), or such things as one's status in a rigid social hierarchy, etc. For Kant dignity is a technical term referring to the unique worth possessed by an end-in-itself.

The term dignity is sometimes used as synonymous with respect and self-respect. Self-respect can be undermined or crushed by the attitudes and treatment of others, and that part of what makes such things wrong is their effect on self-respect. But self-respect can also be nourished by others attitudes and treatment. Benevolence, kindness, generosity, and compassion are virtues – traits that "foster good human life in extensive and fundamental ways" – in large part because the expression of them supports the self-respect of their recipients by affirming their intrinsic worth and importance as persons. It also seems clear that significant effect flow in the opposite direction as well. Since the person who respects himself understands and properly values his moral status and rights as a person, consistently requires him to respect others on the same grounds as he respects himself. Other things equal, respecting oneself, would make it more likely that one would also respect others. Transferred into the world of politics, one could say that oppression, punishment, sanctions, wars, poverty, all those indicators of human insecurity, make persons feel degraded, their self-respect undermined. Consequently, this may have detrimental consequences for how those individuals will treat others. Violence brings violence; aggression of all kind, physical or verbal, deprivation of resources, of fair opportunities may cause urge to react in the same way.

A confident sense of worth is of great value psychologically. Its value is, for example, in the energy with which it enables us to pursue our life plans. Not only its presence is self-enhancing, but also its absence can be profoundly debilitating and destructive. When our lives seem meaningless, our activities of little value, our capabilities minimal,— when living is like this, living well is impossible. And to the extent that living well is morally significant, then having a secure sense of worth is morally significant.

### Self-respect and social institutions

Self-respect is socially constructed. Every society develops intricate patterns of normative views and expectations about oneself, self-worth, and appropriate forms of life, and about the social, political and economic institutions and practices within which individuals may seek to affirm self-respect. These patterns of expectations shape our self-conceptions and our lives and provide the framework within which we recognize, evaluate, and seek to secure and enhance our worth and sense of worth. In a society with a history of race or class discrimination, the socially developed expectations that construct self-respect reflect the devaluation of persons of certain races or classes, with the effect that the capacity of individuals in disfavored groups to have self-respect can be undermined in a variety of ways.

Self-respect is often regarded as primarily a personal phenomenon. A matter of beliefs, attitudes, and conduct of the individual, and whether an individual respects herself or not is often regarded as something for which the individual bears the chief responsibility. However, many of the contemporary discussions recognize that there are substantial social and political dimensions to self respect. For example, whether individuals respect themselves or not is very much a function of their social relationships and of the structure and functioning of the social institutions among which they live; when those relationships and institutions are unjustly discriminating, or oppressive, self-respect can be diminished, distorted, or destroyed. Not surprisingly, resistance to injustice and struggles for liberation from oppression also implicate self-respect in a variety of ways. More deeply, the very nature and meaning of self-respect and how it is constituted and secured are subject to social construction, and the evaluation of such constructions involves issues of social justice. Political moment against social injustice can have the effect of enhancing self-respect of members of a group that has been subject to injustice; equally important, the primary goal of the civil rights movement ought to be the securing of the self-respect of oppressed. This suggests that the liberation of a group of people from the oppression of institutionalized injustice involves not only winning freedom and equality but also liberating self-respect. Second, since social institutions have a profound effect on how people view themselves, the justice of social institutions must be judged according to their impact on self-respect. The social institutions of a given society are fairly arranged if and only if they are conducive to every member of society having self-respect. A racist society is unjust precisely because it targets people on the basis of their race in ways that subvert self-respect. Denial of civil rights to some, in particular the denial of protection of discrimination in employment and housing, is forcing certain individuals to trade dignity and integrity for security – this undermines the sense of dignity of those individuals often to the point of rendering them unable to see their situation as unjust.

But the recognition of what is degrading, intolerable, and unjust is a necessary condition for resisting it.

## A note on human security and human rights of children

*“Human security is not a concern with weapons- it is a concern with human life and human dignity”*

Human Development Report, 1994

Surely the world is not fair. The distribution of power, of goods, of resources is unequal. While some have a lot, there are many more who lack even the basics. The basics are security, freedom from fear, hope for the future, fair opportunities to fulfill own potentials.

Wars, poverty, oppression of different kind deprive too many children of basic raw materials necessary to live a decent life. Increased feelings of vulnerability and insecurity make thoughts about the future full of uneasiness and despair. Man-made disasters are especially detrimental to personality development of the young. Beliefs about the world being safe, just, nice place to live, about people being good, honest, moral, is drastically shaken by their traumatic experiences. They quickly learn there are set of values that all on this globe should, but don't share. Let us take the example of detrimental effects of wars on children's lives.

In the past decade, around 2 million children have been killed in armed conflicts, while more than 4 million have survived physical mutilation and more than one million have been orphaned or separated from their families as a result of war. Countless others have been forced to witness or even to take part in horrifying acts of violence. Such experiences leave emotional, psychological scars that may last until the rest of their lives and will affect the quality of life and psychological well-being of those children.

The global case-load of refugees and displaced persons is growing at an alarming rate. The number of refugees from armed conflicts worldwide increased from 2.4 million in 1974 to more than 27.4 million in 1996, with another 30 million people displaced within their own countries. Children make at least half of the estimated 57.4 million people displaced by war around the world. (Machel, 1996)

Coupled with rapid social changes which often precede or accompany war, armed conflicts leads to a breakdown of the family support system, so essential to a child's survival and development. Safety nets collapse. Not only are large numbers of children killed and injured, but countless others grow up deprived of their material and emotional needs, including structures that give meaning to social life. The entire fabric of their societies – their homes, schools, health systems and religious institutions – are torn to pieces. As a result, children are being denied the protection promised in the Convention on the Rights of the Child – “War violates every right of a child – the right to life, the right to be with family and community, the right to health, the right to the development of the personality, and the right to be nurtured and protected” (Machel, 1996).

Psychological well-being and dignity

An individual who is subject to permanent oppression, those who have been traumatized by witnessing horrifying events, those who have survived mass calamities, refugees who had been forced to leave their homes and continue to live in full uncertainty, all those may experience a significant damage to their psychological functioning and a sense of well-being. They feel insecure, deprived of decent treatment, hopeless and helpless. Those feelings may lead to a vicious circle in which lost dignity and deprivation of freedom and insecurity become a source of further victimization.

There are many accounts of the way in which a damaged self-respect helps to perpetuate oppression.

One example is a degenerating “sense of nobodiness” that engenders a hopeless adjustment to segregation and an inability to see the intolerable as intolerable.

Another example is psychological oppression that occurs in oppressive societies when individuals internalize inferiority, to become unwitting participants in their own oppression by accepting inferiority.

To counter a sense of “nobodiness” one has to provide support for a sense of “somebodiness”. Internalized inferiority will best be counteracted with internalized self-worth. In both of those instances human dignity is being enhanced.

In what other ways may an individual dignity be enhanced? Language is just one example. Individuals who have experienced disasters would benefit from being referred to as survivors, rather than victims.

Poor, not educated would opt for “deprived of opportunities, instead of “third-class citizens, or low SES class.

A refugee child will flourish better if being called by his name and not “ a refugee child”

Programs should aim at “assisting people in crisis”, rather than labeling them as “patients”

The goal of such programs should be to” support psychological well being of affected” population, rather than “treatment of the victims”.

How important is to preserve dignity is best illustrated by the accounts of Nazi concentration camps survivors.

Where survival itself is at stake, as it was for prisoners in Nazi death camps, the struggle to maintain self-respect under conditions designed to obliterate human dignity is essential to surviving in any meaningful sense.

To survive one has to find a meaning of own life, according to Frankl, a Nazi concentration camp survivor. This may be achieved, among other: “.....by experiencing another human being in his very uniqueness – by loving him”. (Frankl, 1984,p. 115)

The passage from merely surviving to richly living brings with it love and respect for others.

**In sum, a culture of empathy is required and, based on this, a culture of protection of human dignity**

Because, “*Whatever we give to others, life gives us back*”  
(Nobel Prize winner, I. Andric, *Ex ponto*)