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## THE ROLE OF SUFFERING IN THE PSYCHOLOGICAL PROCESS

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**Abstract:** This article promotes a reflection on the role of suffering in the process of psychological development. The discussion is based on concepts from Analytical Psychology, such as: psychic energy, progression, regression and the process of individuation. To this end, a bibliographic analysis of works by Carl Jung and post-Jungian authors was carried out. The results of this investigation demonstrate that accepting and facing suffering are relevant attitudes for healthy development. On the other hand, avoiding and not facing suffering can generate a chronicity of symptoms, instead of providing a better adaptation of the individual to his/her reality.

**Keywords:** Depression; Mental Health; Psychic Distress; Analytical Psychology; Psychic Energy.

## INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Western culture is marked by an ideological bias that values productivity and the exploitation of matter. Therefore, each person is expected to have an attitude compatible with this ideal, that is, that individuals are capable of being productive and are always ready for work and social collaboration. In some situations, however, this collaboration becomes unfeasible. Even when a person finds themselves in this place of inability to act, external reality - more specifically social reality - continues to make demands on them and impose that they complete tasks and achieve goals.

On the other hand, internally, the individual may face situations and psychological states that require a pause, a time for reflection. This time is necessary so that one can absorb what has happened and process the changes that follow from the impacts experienced in life - losses, mourning, violence and other traumas. In other words, internal reality also has demands to be considered, which relate to the attempt to restore health. In general,

individuals in pain do not feel comfortable experiencing pain, but rather are persistently compelled to overcome it or move on with their lives ignoring it. Analytical Psychology, however, indicates that in some situations, it is necessary to face the discomfort, and not just avoid it or wait for the moment when it will cease. Suffering is a symptom of the need for internal reworking. This process, despite being painful, aims to restore psychological balance.

This article aims to propose a reflection on the regressive processes of psychic dynamics, which, in general, are socially avoided and judged negatively. Analytical Psychology has sufficient theoretical basis to explain that suffering is not always a sign of illness. On the contrary: sometimes its objective is to restore psychic balance, as part of a natural process of maintaining health.

## DEVELOPMENT

Duality permeates material life, in which we experience our consciousness in a human body. Consciousness develops within these terms, permeated by the comparison of good and bad, right and wrong, yes and no and so many other pairs of opposites. Jung explains:

Everyday psychological experience [sic] provides proof of the accuracy of the following proposition: the most serious conflicts, when overcome, leave a security and tranquility that is difficult to disturb or else a rupture, almost impossible to heal, and vice versa: it is precisely the greatest oppositions and their conflagration that will produce valuable and stable results (JUNG, 2014, p. 38).

Therefore, despite our search for unity, as dictated by the individuation process, we develop from duality, which is observed in the presence of conflict. For Analytical Psychology, psychic dynamics are structured in a compensatory logic, which aims to achieve balance through the interaction between

opposites. To understand how this works, it is necessary to address the definition of psychic energy, within Analytical Psychology, as well as the concept of energy.

We often reach clear conclusions about the causes of symptoms and difficulties that we face on our path in life. Understanding the cause helps in the elaboration of what happened, which leads to greater clarity in thought and, consequently, a secure basis for emotional experience. However, understanding the cause does not necessarily lead to overcoming and the changes necessary to continue living life with balance. The energetic bias, when conceiving the psychic process through purpose, allows an understanding beyond the mechanistic-causal logic, opening up to a broader understanding of psychic dynamics, which is guided by the search for balance.

## ENERGY DYNAMICS

Jung argues that, unlike the mechanistic-causal consideration (which is based on the understanding of the substance that moves in space), the energetic consideration has an essentially finalistic character, understanding phenomena from the effect to the cause, “in the sense that at the root of the mutations that occur in phenomena there is an energy that remains constant, producing, entropically, a state of general equilibrium within these mutations” (JUNG, 2014, p. 12).

The energetic conception is therefore based on the interpretation of psychic dynamics from movement. The greater focus is given to the relationships that occur between psychic contents, in order to understand the direction, purpose and objective of these relationships. The author (JUNG, 2014, p. 12) clarifies:

The unfolding of the energy process has a defined direction (a goal), invariably (irreversibly) obeying the difference in potential. The idea of energy is not that of a substance that moves in space, but a concept abstracted from the relations of movement.

Its bases are therefore not the substances as such, but their relations, whereas the foundation of the mechanistic concept is the substance that moves in space.

From this explanation, we can see the importance of embracing life's ups and downs, considering that both are part of this process of movement. Thus, by denying some emotional states and psychological experiences, part of the psychological process is also impeded. From an energetic perspective, our psyche dedicates an intensity of energy (generates a movement) with a defined direction, but this movement - which always aims to restore psychic balance - can be interrupted when it is suppressed by external pressure.

Regarding energetic dynamics, Jung (2014, p. 46) states that “One of the most important energetic phenomena of psychic life is undoubtedly the progression and regression of libido”. According to the author, progression is directly related to adaptation, and its need arises in every change in the environment that requires new behavior.

It is, therefore, related to a change in attitude. Adaptation never ends, because changes in external reality are continuous. In short, “The progression of libido would thus consist in continually satisfying the demands of environmental conditions” (JUNG, 2014, p. 46).

There are two stages of adaptation: the first is to conceive of the new attitude and the second is to complete the adaptation by putting the new attitude into practice. There are situations in which an individual will not be able to act with a new attitude adapted to external demands. If this occurs, this process will not be completed, and this way the invested libido will be dammed and will lead the individual to reach a psychological state loaded with affects. In his work, Jung makes it clear that the damming of libido is always characterized by the disintegration of opposing pairs.

During the progression of the libido, the pairs of opposites are united in the coordinated course of psychological processes. Their joint action makes possible the balanced regularity of the process, which would become one-sided and pointless without an inner counteraction. [...] It is therefore part of the essence of progression – which is the successful work of adaptation – that the impulse and the counter-impulse, the Yes and the No, come into regular reciprocal action and influence. We see, for example, this adjustment and union of the pairs of opposites during the process of reflection that precedes a serious decision. In the case of a damming up of the libido, in which progression has become impossible, the Yes and the No can no longer unite in a coordinated act, since the Yes and the No acquire equal values, which balance each other out. The longer the damming up lasts, the more the value of the opposing positions increases, which accordingly become enriched with associations, incorporating ever new territories of the psychic material. Tension leads to conflict; conflict leads to attempts to reciprocally repress one another, and when the opposing party is suppressed, dissociation sets in, the “splitting of the personality”; disagreement with oneself, thus creating the possibility of neurosis (JUNG, 2014, p. 47).

From this situation generated by the conflict, so that pathological consequences are not reached, the psychic dynamics begin regression - the retrograde movement of the libido (contrary to progression). In this movement, psychic energy is invested towards internal reality, seeking new possibilities of attitudes beyond consciousness. The author argues that regression must not be interpreted as a setback, but as a necessary phase of evolution, even though people find themselves in this position (which is often uncomfortable) in a forced way, making it difficult to become aware that this state is also a stage of development.

Therefore, regression of the libido is considered part of the evolutionary process, and only “if the human being remains in this state can we speak of regression, involution or degeneration” (JUNG, 2014, p. 51). Likewise, the author states that progression must not be considered as necessarily evolutionary. In summary, the author explains:

Progression, as an uninterrupted process of adaptation to environmental conditions, is based on the vital need for adaptation. This need imposes absolute orientation towards environmental conditions and the repression of all tendencies and possibilities that are in the service of individuation. Regression, on the other hand, as adaptation to the conditions of one’s own inner world, is based on the vital need to meet the demands of individuation. (JUNG, 2014, p. 54).

Therefore, evolution and involution are not directly related to progression and regression. Furthermore, despite being considered a negative process in the eyes of the productivist logic of society, regression actually carries the “seeds of new possibilities for life” (JUNG, 2014, p. 49). These new possibilities are found in regression. During the regressive process, energy is directed to the unconscious, since it contains contents that were previously not considered adaptive to consciousness but now need to be recovered due to new external demands. In other words, contents previously considered non-adaptive and previously rejected by consciousness can become adaptive and, therefore, need to be found in the unconscious. Because it is related to the energy direction with a sense of interiority, regression also plays an essential role in the process of individuation.

## THE PROCESS OF INDIVIDUATION

It is known that contemporary Western culture has a logic that encourages individuals to seek external achievements. For Jung, this is a striking characteristic in the first half of life, in which our goal is to develop and strengthen the ego and, during this period, to achieve a social role - a way of contributing our individuality to the collective. However, in the second half of life, the greater focus would be on inner development. According to Stein:

[...] individuation pushes consciousness and self-realization beyond the threshold at which normal developmental processes regulated by genes, psyche and society cease to operate (STEIN, 2020, p. 11).

According to the author, the process of individuation is a natural imperative that leads to the expansion of consciousness. Therefore, it compels the individual to go beyond the development threshold that leads to social adaptation, which would be guided by genetics and cultural factors. Character and personality are developed during childhood and youth, and are experienced in adulthood. Based on this basis, individuation “seeks to take the ego-consciousness out and beyond its established personal characteristics and habits and assimilated cultural attitudes [...], aiming at a much broader horizon of self-understanding and fulfillment” (STEIN, 2020, p. 12).

During development and also during the individuation process, we are led to psychic experiences that can place us in a psychological state that goes against the productivist logic that prevails in contemporary society. It is important to highlight that, although the development trend is directed with a greater focus on the social in the first half of life, the other poles of life are not abandoned or disconnected at any time.

The human person is not a machine in the sense that he can have a constant work output, but he can only respond optimally to external needs if he is also adjusted to his own inner world, that is, if he is in harmony with himself. And, conversely, he can only adjust to his own inner world and achieve harmony with himself if he is also adapted to the conditions of the environment. The neglect of one or the other of these functions can only occur temporarily, as experience shows [...] (JUNG, 2014, p. 54).

Therefore, it is important to consider the individual's internal needs. Suffering is a symptom that signals an internal need. This need arises when the person's attitude is no longer compatible with external demands. External changes require internal changes, since the individual will need to go through an adaptation process to find new ways of acting in the face of a new reality. Internal and external demands force the individual to adapt throughout their life. Adaptation occurs through a change in attitude, but a change in attitude is only possible through regression - a contact with the unconscious that can make the individual go through a less productive phase in external reality.

## MENTAL HEALTH

From the above, we can infer that the psychic process is established from movement. Heraclitus of Ephesus, a philosopher who lived in the 5th century BC, already defended: the only constant is change. According to the thinker, “The total equilibrium of the cosmos can only be maintained if change in one direction eventually leads to change in the other, that is, if there is an endless discord between opposites” (KIRK, RAVEN, SCHOFIELD, 2010, p. 200). The idea that a person cannot step into the same river twice is attributed to him, since the second time neither the person nor the river will be the same. According to the aforementioned

authors (2010, p. 202), the philosopher Plato argued that “this image of the river was used by Heraclitus to emphasize the absolute continuity of change in each of the things: everything is in a perpetual flow like a river”. Considering this, living in a society that values some psychological states and disapproves of others is synonymous with living in a culture that impedes the natural movement of life itself. Therefore, it makes sense to say that it is a sickening culture, as it impedes and interrupts a process that aims to restore balance (both internal and external).

The increasing number of cases of mental illness being observed in our society, declared by the World Health Organization in the latest World Report on Mental Health (WHO, 2022), can be considered clear proof that something is out of order in our way of life. In fact, it can even lead us to question the definition of what illness is, and why regressive psychological states or suffering are considered illness, not being accepted as simply part of the process of psychic rebalancing. Regarding this, psychologist Carlos Byington (2007, p. 3) explains:

From a symbolic perspective, I conceive of depression as a normal structuring function that, when fixed and not elaborated, becomes pathological. Regardless of whether we like or dislike a structuring function, regardless of how much it displeases us or makes us suffer, it always has the capacity to produce meanings to form the identity of the Ego and of things (of the Other) in Consciousness. When we think this way, we need to discover what the normal performance of the structuring function of sadness or depression is in the process of symbolic elaboration.

For the aforementioned author, depression can be considered normal, but if it is fixed and not worked through, it becomes pathological. This statement confirms the idea that mental illness needs to have space to be experienced

and, therefore, worked through; if this space is not socially permitted, it can lead to the chronicity of symptoms that, if worked through, could serve to expand awareness and a new adaptation of the individual to their current reality.

Byington explains that, as a normal structuring function, depression is activated by suffering and, this way, the Ego directs the libido towards working through the pain, moving away from other structuring functions, which “discourages” the personality from any other ongoing project. Productivity (considered only in the external aspect), therefore, declines. Despite this, the author argues that this discouragement must be welcomed and admitted, after all, in his words, this is considered an “existential procedure that is not only normal, but also necessary and even essential for working through and integrating the suffering arising from wounded symbols. This is an essential condition of psychological life” (BIYNGTON, 2007, p. 3). Therefore, psychic pain is part of all psychological elaboration.

Just like the relationship between all pairs of opposites, illness exists in conjunction with health. As Jung explained: “According to the law of enantiodromia, of contrary flows, so well interpreted by the Chinese, with the end of a cycle comes the beginning of its opposite. Thus, Yang at its limit transforms into Yin, and positive into negative” (JUNG, 2013, p. 15). Illness is a symptom, and the symptom is a form of communication between psychic reality and consciousness.

The symptom is a disguised cry, a call coming from our body, which summons us to pay attention to ourselves. This cry is a call for help, a request to pay more attention to something - something we do not yet know exactly what, and that is why it is expressed through a symptom, since it has not yet been consciously elaborated. Byington makes an

analogy between the physical body and the psychic reality to explain the importance of embracing suffering:

If one day we discovered an anesthetic that preventatively eliminated all and any pain, it would probably fetch a high price on the market and millions of people would buy it, as yet another happy pill. The profits from selling this medication would certainly be fabulous. However, what doctor in his right mind would recommend this course of action? If this were done, epidemiological statistics would probably show that diseases had increased greatly, because, without pain, diagnoses would be made with great delay, severely hindering early treatment of diseases and contributing to their worsening. The analogy between depression, on the one hand, and pain and physical suffering, on the other, allows us to see that the intelligent reaction of the doctor to them is acceptance and acceptance. Just as a complaint of pain is a cry for help from the injured organism, so must depression be considered. By accepting depression and embracing it, the therapist admits that he is being asked to respond to a call for help and to cooperate in the symbolic elaboration of the experiences of a suffering human being (BYINGTON, 2007, p. 4).

This idea is also defended by Stein (2020, p. 18), when he states that “Health and development are not optional in the psychological sphere, just as they are not in the physical sphere. The psyche has its own demands, just as the soma has its own, also specific ones.” According to him, “The denial of the imperative of individuation has a price, however, and sometimes it is this that becomes the most important factor in a person’s life.” Likewise, denying suffering also has a price. Byington warns:

A competent physician can never automatically prescribe an anti-pain medication without first seeking to understand the origin and meaning of the pain. If he did so, he would risk concealing and delaying the diagnosis and treatment of many diseases, putting the health and, in

the case of a serious illness, even the life of the patient at risk. However, if he considered pain in itself a disease and not a warning symptom, that is exactly what he would do, but he would inevitably incur medical error and iatrogenesis. Unfortunately, this is what is increasingly happening with depression (BYINGTON, 2007, p. 4).

Running away from the symptom, denying it, burying it, suppressing it: none of these things are synonymous with solving it. When the body signals that we no longer have the strength, the will, the hope, the courage or so many other pains, silencing this call for attention is only postponing self-knowledge and can lead to the chronicity of suffering.

The objective of this article, however, is not to talk about suffering with the purpose of romanticizing it, but rather to draw attention to the problems that exist in the search that we, as a society, have to cure suffering by ignoring it or running away from it.

There is a balance between these two opposites, which we can call coping with suffering, which allows us to experience this psychic experience in order to understand it and, thus, achieve a better adaptation to life.

In other words, experiencing discomfort is important so that, through it, we can achieve balance again. This movement is represented in the Yin-Yang symbol, where the germ of white is present in black, and vice versa. In order to illustrate this issue through mythology, we have the following note:

Normal depression as a structuring function of the development of Consciousness accompanies many of humanity’s great achievements. We often fail to realize that the hero, in Mythology, is willing to face the dragon not simply because of the challenge of overcoming and integrating the monster’s life force, but also because of the need to save the community from the damage and suffering it causes. The long heroic journey across oceans, forests and deserts always includes encountering and fighting monsters

responsible for many misfortunes, which are therefore considered expressions of the Shadow (BYINGTON, 2007, p. 16).

By facing suffering (represented by the dragon), the hero saves the princess and, from there, they can get married. Marriage is a symbol of the union of opposites, of integration. Without facing the dragon, the hero would not have achieved the overcoming that was born from this battle won. However, as pointed out by Byington (2007), although depression is a structuring function and a portion of depressive cases are normal, another portion of cases reach a pathological level. Thus, it is up to the psychologist to listen, examine, reflect and understand each case in particular. Some social intersections, however, hinder the freedom for a more comprehensive assessment of each individual's psychological situation. After all, it may be socially required that the suffering patient return to their capacity for productivity, preventing them from following the restorative flows induced by their psychic system. According to the author Verena Kast (2014), the inner world currently receives little attention, with the quest to become a successful and functional person being of greater importance, socially speaking. From this perspective, people who do not meet these requirements are classified as ill, but there is rarely any interest in the existential issues surrounding this illness.

Furthermore, it is not common to recognize that this psychological state contributes to the development of the person and is related to the challenge of enhancing inactive aspects of the personality. When faced with illness or a decline in productivity, the individual must face an external demand that does not validate his or her psychological situation. The author explains:

Normality needs to be restored quickly so that human beings can function again. That is why short-term therapies are more popular than a longer search for what went wrong in life, what needs to be changed. Life is viewed from an economic point of view; the science that determines our lives seems to be economics: that which does not yield anything is worthless. Of course, we need economics. But, as Ernst Fehr said in an interview with NZZ am Sonntag (July 22, 2012), the efficiency of the rational market robs society of its soul. (KAST, 2016, p. 14).

Kast (2014) argues that the soul needs time to mature, stating that when something destroys the balance of our soul, it takes time to restore that balance. According to the author, time does not heal all wounds, but time is a necessary factor for the healing process (recognized as a process of seeking balance) to follow its course. By respecting the time necessary for this stage of the process to be experienced, health can be restored. In the words of the author:

A depressive mood can be seen as a physical disorder that needs to be treated with medication. But it can also be seen as an expression of an inner problem, a life problem that needs to be treated; it can be seen as an ignored developmental need. From a symbolic point of view, a disorder does not just mean discomfort; it has a meaning, it refers to a developmental need. (KAST, 2014, p. 47).

From this perspective, suffering occupies a place of stimulus for development. This place is almost the opposite of the place of productivity limiter to which it is currently assigned. As a field of experience and learning, suffering, when faced, can even be considered productive, as it impels the individual to seek, in unconscious contents, a new adaptation to his or her current situation.



## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

We have recently been experiencing a period of social crisis: with the pandemic, cases of mental illness have increased significantly. Although each person faces them individually, we cannot ignore the fact that mental illness is also linked to a much larger network of relationships, which involve a specific culture, economic system, and worldview and way of life.

Fear, violence, hunger, precarious living conditions, polluted air and water, urban overcrowding, and the destruction of nature: these are some of the factors that generate suffering and are directly associated with culture. Therefore, an individual who suffers from this reality is not necessarily sick, but may be coping healthily with the difficulties that are placed before them. Classifying every person in suffering as sick can lead to the chronicity of this state. The search for the elimination of suffering can lead to avoidance and denial, instead of confrontation and resolution.

As explained throughout the text, adaptive demands can arise from both external and internal reality. The need for change generates discomfort and requires the individual to

change their attitude. This change can take time and can be painful, thus leading the person to experience suffering. By being allowed to experience suffering, the individual can face it and, thus, modify what needs to be modified and adopt an updated posture that is more adapted to their reality.

Some experiences of suffering can be overcome, but not all. Therefore, it is necessary to welcome the needs of each person and allow them to have time and tools to face their suffering and seek solutions. From the moment that it is noted that the individual is unable to readapt, one can begin to consider considering their state as an illness. However, caution is needed in this regard, since the classification and, from this, a possible medicalization of a healthy state of suffering can, instead of helping this adaptive process, make the negative symptoms arising from suffering chronic.

Therefore, it is important for psychology professionals to adopt a critical stance in this regard, seeking to understand each case in particular, thus helping the patient to understand their internal demands and their ability to cope. Thus, the last alternative is to classify suffering as illness - a state of chronic suffering.

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