

HOW A PSYCHOLOGIST LOOKED FOR PEACE OF MIND

Ramón Bayés (2010)
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H HOW CAN WE PSYCHOLOGISTS HELP PEOPLE TO IMPROVE THEIR SUFFERING OR FIND HAPPINESS AS A LIFE GOAL?

Ramón Bayés is one of the most important scientists in the history of Spanish psychology. A Professor Emeritus at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, and Doctor Honoris Causa from the UNED [National Distance Learning University in Spain], among other accolades, he has authored more than 700 scientific and informative publications, most of them in the area of health: Oncology, HIV, geriatrics and palliative care.

Accustomed to his writings full of the rigor pertaining to scientific methods, of which he has been one of the main disseminators in Spain, Bayés gives us on this occasion, in a deep and engaging style, a book in which he reflects on the purpose of life, time, pain and suffering as well as the human being's ability to overcome difficulties, aspects that have occupied his attention in recent years. The book fills the informational void on the subject of suffering and palliative care, sorely needed in Peru.

The title "How a psychologist looked for peace of mind" alludes to the almost autobiographical style, inviting us, through a reflection on his career, values and the people who have guided him, to address each of the themes in the book. It is a journey through the life of a psychologist seeking serenity and happiness in the latter part of his life. In spite of this feature, the reflections are also based on empirical findings obtained from experimental work with different people in diverse situations.

The book is divided into five chapters. In the first of them, "The wonderful color of lobelias," the author offers an analysis of eleven ideas (from scientists, philosophers and theologians) that have guided much of his life, both academically and personally. While the ideas are not

equally important for all people, they are far from trivial; in fact they are rather instructive.

The second chapter, entitled "From the blurry footprint of my sandals on the beach, to the vastness of the sea", reviews the issues that have attracted the author's attention in recent years: aging, time and death. The third chapter, "On happiness and suffering," provides guidance on what psychologists can do to help people alleviate their suffering and achieve happiness as a goal of life.

Since 2000, a change has been called for in the traditional objectives of medicine, its advocates insisting that the purpose of medicine in the new century will not only prevent death but also, just as importantly, ensure that patients die in peace when death arrives despite every possible effort. Every day thousands of people worldwide are suffering from a terminal illness. Are we health professionals (psychologists, doctors, nurses, etc.) equipped with the adequate emotional, affective and communicational resources to deal with these kinds of people and situations? It is no secret that many health professionals lack the suitable communication skills, do not know to explain the medical situation that their patient suffers from, and perceive death as a failure, sometimes using aggressive methods in dealing with their patients. Bayés invites us to reflect on suffering. He defines it as "the dynamic and changing consequence, of the interaction in specific contexts, between the perception of threat and the perception of resources, modulated by the state of mind. The more threatening a situation appears to the patient, the student or the teacher -to anyone- and the less control they believe they have over the situation, the greater their suffering" (p. 134). The relationship between suffering and the perception of control is therefore clear, and differentiated from pain. Thus, not all people who suffer will experience pain nor will all those that experience pain suffer. Thus suffering, in terminal people,

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would be related to ignorance of the origin of their pain, their perception of threat and the belief that it cannot be alleviated, i.e., when they see no possibility of controlling it in the future. Suffering, time and control are intimately linked.

From reading the chapters, it can be deduced that both suffering and death are universal phenomena. Death is a natural and inevitable phenomenon that affects all people sooner or later, including psychologists. The causes of suffering are innumerable and different for every person and at every stage of their life. Controlling the physical symptoms of terminal situations is important, but not enough to eliminate suffering; this will require that the patient perceives a decrease in the negative evaluation of the threatening situation. The author himself says: "If we want to alleviate suffering and offer the path to serenity, we must learn not only to explore human beings as individuals, but we must also help them, as far as possible, to gain control over the situation in which they find themselves" (p. 134).

The committed support of healthcare professionals and identification with the patient may be the necessary tool to alleviate suffering and assist in the search for meaning in the days lived. This implies delving into the psychological and emotional processes of the dying process, relationships among the terminally ill patients, their family members who will suffer loss and the healthcare professionals. In this case, making appropriate and effective use of counseling is crucial.

The last two chapters, "Because I am psychologist and not an electrician, a playboy, a gnome, a centipede, a worm, a cloud or a simple sunset" and "Twilight in the Arctic Circle" tell of the people and motives that prompted

our author's choice of profession, to which he would devote nearly 50 years of tenacious work. The book ends with a chronological selection of the most important publications (books and articles) by the author, which provides a glimpse of his intellectual path.

Overall, the work allows us to see in perspective the complexity of the path of a person searching for happiness and the meaning of life as well as the variety of ways offered by scientific psychology to provide solutions to the complex problems of human reality. The relevance of the book for psychology lies in the extensiveness with which the issues are treated, reminding us of the complexity of the individual and the situations faced by those of us who are interested in understanding life, suffering and the desire to live. Effectively detecting, preventing and fighting the anxiety and depression typical of this situation are tasks for psychologists.

The book is extremely important and useful for behavioral scientists and all healthcare professionals whose clinical practice involves constant interaction with terminally ill patients and their families who seek a way beyond the specialized technical manual. It is also suitable for the training of future health professionals whose understanding of the experience of the disease should be both scientific and sensitive. Bayés makes the world of science attractive to us by adding sensitivity and scientific rigor to every one of his words. Similarly, the simplicity and clarity in his use of language makes this an easy-to-read text for students and professionals from different areas of healthcare. It is a book that encourages reflection on life, health, illness, suffering and happiness, and on the negative practices of many of us in clinical practice.

