Title: Love: Preserving Meaning

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Love is kind, patient, gentle, strong, resilient, honorable, trustworthy and trusting. It is all of these and more. Those who love nurture this feeling and watch it grow. One expression of love builds on another until love becomes second nature and effortless.

But, in nursing what is love?

Love is preventing the loss of meaning in life. It is protecting faith, hope and meaning. This is a great challenge and a goal we all strive for despite our many hurdles. How does one prevent the loss of meaning in life for another? There are many ways.

Presence is essential - an essential “being with” and “being for” another. In essence, always being there when another is needed for solace, comfort or to meet everyday challenges and to preserve meaning. Meaning is what a person believes it to be. Loss of meaning is devastating. Being the presence that prevents a loss of meaning is the essence of love.

Presence may be expressed in a variety of ways, some more tangible, some less so. The tangible aspects of presence are physical availability, psychological availability and social availability. The less tangible aspects are those that maybe the most important such as supporting another’s faith in one. Simply expressing love with small acts of kindness. These may be tangible and intangible.

But, how does one prevent the loss of meaning? One can coach, one can advise, one can remain mute under certain circumstances. One can teach that no matter what is lost there is are still many aspects of life that may be accessed to remedy that which is lost. Or, teach that it may be a loss of experiences that give meaning. One may teach that there are always more aspects of life - more life experiences. Hope continues that one can recover from any loss as long as meaning is maintained - that losses may be supplanted with more things, experiences, and relationships.

Love does all of this and more. Love prevents the loss of meaning by being the essential meaning in life. Love may be the meaning for which many of us strive.

I grew up in nursing as a public health nurse and later a primary health care nurse. Primary, secondary and tertiary prevention were uppermost. Many aspects of health care have to do with these levels of prevention; primary prevention is seen as most important and sacrosanct. Secondary and tertiary very important if primary prevention is breached.

For myself, after many years of practice with many patients, I have come to believe that the epitome of primary prevention we can provide for our clients is that of the primary prevention of a loss of meaning. Providing for them the presence sometimes identified with love - the presence during life’s trials and tribulations to prevent the loss of life’s meaning.

This is a major goal of the health professions, I believe, although seldom expressed or possibly even understood or recognized by practitioner or patient.

For patients, loss of meaning might mean chronic illness or loss of a loved one. It may mean loss of a goal in life, loss of face, or loss of social position. Meaning represents different things to different patients. Symbolic interactionism is a theory that says one cannot understand another unless one understands the meaning an experience has for them.

Most health professionals recognize only tangentially that it is the loss of meaning in life that we are all trying to prevent in our clients - preventing them from losing their self-respect, hope, love, faith - preventing them from experiencing such devastating loss that they lose their will to continue life. I believe it to be our highest calling.

The conclusion I have come to is that love is presence and presence is primary prevention of the loss of meaning. As health care professionals this is our talent, our charge and our achievement.