Preface

The original intent of this little book is to take on four very big challenges: (1) a framework that makes it easier to think about suffering and measure it, (2) a compilation of available data on how much suffering exists in the world, (3) rationales for why people should become more aware of the vast volume of severe suffering around the world, and (4) justification for giving higher priority to the reduction of suffering in our personal, state, and global policy objectives. With these goals, you should not be surprised that the book looks at suffering from many different angles.

After 40 years of teaching sociology and research strategies at the University of Minnesota, I retired in order to just do research, travel, and volunteer work. Making this major life change forced me to confront questions of meaning, especially: What makes life worth living? What is the meaning of suffering? What can one do in later life to optimally contribute to ultimate concerns of human beings? My first major conclusion was that compassion is most needed to secure the human race. But after focusing on compassion for several years, I came to realize that the efficacy of compassion is constrained by the huge supply of suffering in the world, which only seems to be expanding.

When I started reading what others had learned about suffering, I discovered a void of knowledge and concluded that doing pioneering research on suffering would be the best way I could use my talents and experience. It has been exciting to discover some elements of suffering, which are as old as human consciousness itself.

This brief book of about 125 pages, follows the structure and format of all SpringerBriefs, of which there are thousands. In the SpringerBrief model, each chapter is like a separate article with its own abstract, keywords, footnotes, and references. This requirement, I believe, is a good one because it forces the author to make each chapter convey a complete statement of its own, but at the same time makes the chapters flow together so that the entire set is an integral whole.

The first chapter begins by explicitly defining some very different types of suffering from which a taxonomy emerged. People think about suffering in very different ways, depending upon their backgrounds in religion, local culture, and unique personal experiences. Chapter 1 discusses eight 'frames for suffering' and Chap. 2 supplies stories for each way of thinking about suffering. How suffering shapes peoples' quality of life becomes clearer through these stories.

Statistics offer only fleeting glimpses of the distress and agony suffered by some in the course of everyday life. But in Chap. 3, you will see how our taxonomy of suffering helps organize and add meaning to statistics on the health of American adults. People react differently to suffering, depending upon whether it is primarily pain, depression, anxiety, grief, existential suffering, or social suffering.

Before you read in Chap. 3 how many American adults live with extreme suffering, guess the percentage. Of course, it depends on how one defines 'extreme,' but reflects on the question before and after digesting the statistics.

Another important question is how much extreme suffering affects people's quality of life (QOL). The answer may surprise you. Finding so much suffering in a contemporary, affluent society raises the possibility that affluence itself, through lifestyles and beliefs produces types of suffering not typically found in poverty stricken nations.

Chapter 4 shifts to a global perspective and offers pioneering indicators for both subjective and objective suffering country by country. Besides ranking countries by their degree of suffering, the chapter notes how social support networks seem to help people living in different cultures cope with suffering more easily.

Alternative approaches to the alleviation of suffering depend upon the type of suffering, but all types need to be addressed on both the individual and institutional levels. Data comparing nations as well as states in Chap. 5 show the misalignment between suffering and available care resources that may help relieve those who suffer. A major finding is that global inequality is a major cause of suffering and widens gaps in care for those who suffer.

Working toward ending needless suffering is both a personal value and a public good that offers hope to those who suffer now or in the future. Chapter 6 reviews the ethical grounds for alleviating suffering. It also discusses strategies for relief of suffering and notes how the relief of suffering has to be both an individual and a collective effort. Recommendations are offered for incorporating the relief of suffering more fully into social policy for development as well as for individual decision-making.