The purpose of this thesis is to deepen the understanding of patients receiving care for eating disorders, their suffering and how suffering can be alleviated with the goal of creating conditions for the development of better care for the suffering patient. The study is limited to the care of patients suffering from the disease anorexia. The study has a theoretical caring science perspective in accordance with the tradition developed at the Department of Caring Science, Åbo Akademi University, Vaasa. Emanating from the study purpose, the ontological position of the study is focused on the human being, dignity, suffering and caring.

To fulfill the study purpose, the following questions were actualized: what constitutes suffering for patients receiving care for an eating disorder and what can alleviate suffering for patients receiving care for an eating disorder? The data material consists of three autobiographical books and a diary. The epistemological orientation of the study is aimed at understanding and is therefore hermeneutic. Latent content analysis comprises the method used for analysis. Ethical guidelines for research have been followed during the course of the study. The empirical study resulted in eight comprehensive categories, which were summarized and interpreted in relation to the theoretical perspective of the study in order to highlight that which is meaning-bearing in the patient stories.

The study results indicate that patients receiving care for eating disorders are in a struggle with and drama of suffering. The struggle with suffering is characterized in part by the patient’s struggle for dignity and in part by the patient’s struggle for her life. That which constituted suffering in the patient’s struggle for dignity was the absence of understanding for the actual suffering, which was seen in care through care activities, the attitudes of carers and that which the patient found to be missing in care. The patient’s struggle for her life is characterized by the patient’s struggle against evil – a power that steers the patient’s thoughts, emotions and behavior. Evil gives rise to fears, experiences and emotions in a patient, which are also reinforced in conjunction with care when a movement towards a different, unknown future becomes necessary. In order to alleviate suffering a patient needs to encounter a fellow actor, who can confirm her suffering and participate in the struggle against evil. The drama of suffering is characterized by love, faith and hope. Understanding for the whole living human being, trust and hope for a future, in a caring culture, can alleviate suffering and promote health.