

## Lesson 3: Human Dignity

### PURPOSE

To understand human dignity as the special value of human persons and to distinguish this deeper meaning from other ways in which the word dignity is used.

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

1. Understand human dignity as the universal, intrinsic, and inalienable value of human persons.
2. Understand four different ways in which the word dignity is used and understand human dignity as the most fundamental meaning.

### MATERIALS & RESOURCES

- Dignity Associations – Worksheet 1
- Dignity Associations – Worksheet 2
- Four Meanings of Dignity
- Quiz

### VOCABULARY

- Human dignity: the universal, intrinsic, and inalienable value of a human person.
  - » Universal: every person has dignity.
  - » Intrinsic: dignity is within us, we have it just by being human.
  - » Inalienable: dignity cannot be given to us or taken away from us

### PROCEDURE

**Step 1:** Review the previous lesson. Recall the three powers which all living beings share (eat, grow, reproduce), three which only humans and animals share (move, use senses, feel emotions) and two which distinguish humans from all other beings, or the power to think and choose. Highlight that the powers to think and choose are what distinguish humans from all other beings and that we should use these powers in an excellent way.

**Step 2:** Explain that in this lesson, we will deal with the topic of human dignity. When people use the word dignity, they often mean quite different things. This is probably also the case with all of us. To test this, we will play a game.

Ask the students to work in pairs and give them the [Dignity Associations – Worksheet 1](#). After students finish discussing in pairs, ask them to share their conclusions with the rest of the class.

After listening to students' comments, highlight that the word "dignity" is used in several different ways. Some of the most common meanings are:

### **Dignity as honor**

We often associate dignity with nobility, which implies having a high social status, being esteemed by others and society as a whole, and having certain privileges.

The distinguishing factor of this kind of dignity is that it is given to us by society, or the amount of dignity we possess depends on how much society respects and values us. Sometimes, persons possess this kind of dignity not by personal effort, but through their membership or belonging to a certain family or group. On other occasions, people acquire this kind of dignity by their own efforts in achieving success in something that society deems valuable or important.

Since this type of dignity depends on how society perceives us, a person who once had dignity can also lose it (for example, a high government official gets fired due to corruption and loses the title "dignitary" he once had).

### **Dignity as well-being**

Sometimes the word dignity is associated with living well and enjoying material and psychological welfare.

This type of dignity depends on the level of material goods and psychological well-being a person possesses, so some people can possess this dignity to a greater or lesser degree than others. It is acquired either by personal effort (by earning money, etc.) or with the help of others (inheritance, social welfare). It also means that this type of dignity can be lost and that some have more dignity than others.

We use this meaning of the word dignity when, for example, we say that poor or homeless people are not living in dignified conditions or with dignity, or when we say that someone deserves a dignified salary.

Sometimes we also imply that society has the obligation to ensure a certain level of material security to people so that they can live a “dignified” life.

### **Dignity as exceptional moral character and integrity**

The third way in which we often use the word dignity is the dignity of having an exceptional moral character or integrity. We could say that the people who behave in a way that is morally upright, who are conscientious, honorable and just, have dignity.

This also implies that persons who exhibit bad moral behavior lack this kind of dignity.

This type of dignity is always acquired by personal effort, which often implies struggle and hard work. It also implies that we can lose this dignity if we start behaving badly or unjustly.

**Dignity as the universal, intrinsic and inalienable value of human persons**

Finally, there is another meaning of the word dignity. This type of dignity represents the special value all humans have. We call it “human dignity” since the word “human” implies that all humans have it and that they have it simply by being human.

Human dignity also means that no one gives us this dignity (society, political community, family, etc.) but we have it simply by being who we are (human beings); and that no one can take it away from us.

Thus, this dignity does not exist in degrees – one cannot say that some people have more or less than others--each person is equal in dignity.

This dignity also implies that human persons have certain rights which cannot be taken away from them, rights that are accompanied by certain responsibilities.

**Step 3:** Divide students into groups and ask them to fill in [Dignity Associations – Worksheet 2](#). After all groups finish their work, draw the four columns on the board and ask the groups to share their conclusions. Then, write the answers that the students shared on the board in the appropriate columns. Use the answer key as a guide for where to place the appropriate terms.

Finally, give students the [Four Meanings of Dignity](#) handout so they can review each of the meanings later on if they wish.

Explain that whenever we talk about human dignity in the context of this curriculum, we are referring to the deepest meaning of the word dignity, which is the universal, intrinsic and inalienable value of the human person. After having discussed each view of dignity, we can talk about dignity in its deepest, truest sense. Write the definition on the board:

Human dignity: the universal, intrinsic, and inalienable value of a human person.

We can also define each of the three characteristics of human dignity:

Universal: every person has dignity.

Intrinsic: it is within us, we have it just by being human.

Inalienable: dignity cannot be given to us or taken away from us.

**Step 4:** Draw four columns on the board as shown below:

Dignity as honor	Dignity as well-being	Dignity as moral character	Human dignity

Ask each of the students to take the three post-it notes in which they wrote three words or ideas they associate with dignity in the second question of the first Dignity Associations exercise. Then all the students should pass their post-it notes (the ones they created in the Worksheet 1 exercise) in the appropriate column on the board. Discuss the conclusions with the whole class to see which column contains the most papers.

There is a high likelihood that the fourth column will not have the most papers, or that it will even have the least of them. However, this meaning of human dignity is the most fundamental of all and is actually the reason why we use the word dignity to mean any of the other terms.

We should be attentive and consider how we talk and think about human dignity. For example, we cannot say that some people have more human dignity than others, since human dignity cannot be measured in terms of “more” or “less”. Although some people try to define dignity as being restricted to people who possess good health or complete capacities, all people have human dignity, even those who are in a coma or are disabled.

When someone insults and hurts another person, that person still retains his or her intrinsic dignity. Intrinsic means that each person has a special value, without exception. This also implies that we should always treat others and ourselves with care and respect because we all have dignity.

**Step 5:** Divide students into groups and ask them to play the [Quiz](#). Each group has 5 minutes to complete the Quiz. Afterwards, count the correct answers for each group using the answer key as a guide, and announce the winners. Help students to understand the correct answers.

**Step 6:** Summarize. We learned today about the special value that distinguishes humans from all other living and non-living beings: human dignity. Briefly review the four ways in which the term dignity is used and highlight the most fundamental meaning. Recall the definition of human dignity and its three characteristics: universal, intrinsic and inalienable.

## DIGNITY ASSOCIATIONS – WORKSHEET 1

1. Pick the ideas which you most strongly associate with the word *dignity*. Explain your choice.

Everyone has it	Honor	Integrity	Connected to happiness and prosperity
Having good mental health	Respect	It is hard to acquire	Depends on how society views us
Some have it more than others	Being exceptional	We have it just by being human	Special value of human persons
Depends on having enough material goods	Having outstanding character	We lose it when behaving badly	Graceful
It cannot be taken or given away from us	One needs to deserve it	Success	Living an enjoyable life

2. Write, on separate post-it notes, your top three choices and set them aside.
3. Do you think that some terms above should *not* be associated with dignity? Explain why or why not.

**FOUR MEANINGS OF DIGNITY**

Type	Meaning	How is it acquired? Does it require personal effort?	Can it be lost or taken away from us and how?	Does it admit of degrees?	Who has it?
Dignity as honor	Having a high social status, being esteemed by others and society as a whole, or having certain privileges.	It is given to people by society, whether by personal effort, or belonging to a certain family or tribe. (e.g. by achieving success in something that society deems valuable).	Yes, a person who once had dignity can also lose it (e.g. a high government official gets fired because of corruption and loses the title ("dignitary") he once had).	Yes, some more successful or esteemed people are given these titles.	Persons who are successful and enjoy a high social status.
Dignity as well-being	Living well, enjoying material and psychological well-being.	It is acquired by having enough material goods and living a sufficiently comfortable life, either by one's own effort (by earning money, etc.) or with the help of others (inheritance, social welfare).	Yes, it can be lost if a person loses material security, undergoes psychological distress, etc.	Yes, people with more wealth and more comfortable lives have it more than others.	People with sufficient degree of material goods and psychological comfort.
Dignity as moral character and integrity	Being morally upright, having moral character, behaving with integrity.	It is acquired through our personal effort, which often implies struggle and hard work.	We can lose this dignity if we behave badly and unjustly. Persons who exhibit bad moral behavior are said to lack this kind of dignity.	Yes, people who are more virtuous and who have more integrity have it more than others.	People who are behaving morally upright, who are conscientious, honorable and just.
Human dignity	The universal, intrinsic, and inalienable value of human persons.	No one gives a person this dignity (society, political community, family, etc.)	No, it cannot be lost or taken away from us.	No, everyone is equal in human dignity.	All human beings.



**DIGNITY ASSOCIATIONS – WORKSHEET 2**

Assign each of the terms from Worksheet 1 into the appropriate column in the table below. Some terms can fall into multiple categories.

DIGNITY AS HONOR	DIGNITY AS WELL-BEING	DIGNITY AS MORAL CHARACTER	HUMAN DIGNITY

**Answer key for the teacher.**

DIGNITY AS HONOR	DIGNITY AS WELL-BEING	DIGNITY AS MORAL CHARACTER	HUMAN DIGNITY
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Honor</li> <li>» Respect</li> <li>» Depends on how society views us</li> <li>» Some have it more than others</li> <li>» Graceful</li> <li>» Success</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Connected to happiness and prosperity</li> <li>» Having good mental health</li> <li>» Some have it more than others</li> <li>» Depends on having enough material goods</li> <li>» Living an enjoyable life</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Integrity</li> <li>» Being exceptional</li> <li>» It is hard to acquire</li> <li>» Some have it more than others</li> <li>» Having outstanding character</li> <li>» We lose it when behaving badly</li> <li>» Graceful</li> <li>» One needs to deserve it</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Everyone has it</li> <li>» We have it just by being human</li> <li>» Special value of human persons</li> <li>» It cannot be given or taken away from us</li> </ul>

Note:

1. One needs to deserve it – can sometimes apply also to dignity as honor, but it is not always the case.
2. Dignity as well-being can also be connected to success, but it is not always the case.

You can accept different versions of these answers as correct.

**DIGNITY QUIZ**

Mark the sentences as true or false.

1. T / F Not all people have human dignity.
2. T / F The power to choose is shared by all living beings.
3. T / F If we live in difficult circumstances with a lot of distress, we still have human dignity.
4. T / F Society gives us human dignity.
5. T / F Bad people do not have human dignity.
6. T / F People in a coma and people with disabilities have less human dignity.
7. T / F People can have more or less honor, well-being and moral character, but everyone has the same human dignity.
8. T / F Well-being and honor are intrinsic to people.
9. T / F Moral character and integrity is given to us by society.
10. T / F When behaving badly, we lose human dignity.
11. T / F It is wrong to violate human dignity to achieve material well-being or gain honor.

## Quiz – Teacher Answer Key

1. False. Every person has dignity.
2. False. The powers to think and to choose are unique to humans.
3. True. Human dignity is within us and it can't be taken away, regardless of our circumstances.
4. False. Society can give us honors, but human dignity cannot be given or taken away.
5. False. Human dignity is the special value of EVERY human person.
6. False. People in a coma and people with disabilities have the same special value, just by being human.
7. True. People can have more or less honor, well-being and moral character, but everyone has the same human dignity.
8. False. Well-being and honor are things that one can achieve but human dignity is intrinsic.
9. False. Moral character and integrity are related to habits that we can choose to practice.
10. False. Even if we behave badly, our human dignity cannot be taken away.
11. True. It is wrong to violate the human dignity of ourselves or another human being.