Post-Traumatic Growth

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Post-Traumatic Growth

Post-traumatic growth can be defined as the positive psychological change that results from the attempt to find new meaning and resolve after a traumatic event.

The event itself does not cause the positive psychological change, but rather what results from the shattering of a person’s fundamental beliefs, values, and understanding of themselves, others and the world. It is the realization that old meanings no longer apply, and the subsequent search for new ones that results in the psychological shift known as post-traumatic growth. The struggle to find new meaning in the aftermath of the trauma is crucial to positive psychological growth, as well as the acceptance that personal distress and growth can co-exist, and often do, while these new meanings are crafted (Tedeshi, 2004).
The Five Domains Of Post-Traumatic Growth

The opening of new possibilities not present before

A change (deepening) in relationships with others

An increased sense of one’s own personal strength

A greater appreciation for life in general

A deepening or significant change in one’s spirituality.
Differentiating Post-Traumatic Growth

Different from the concepts of resilience, emotional toughness, or optimism, post-traumatic growth involves not just the ability to resist and avoid damage from highly stressful life events, but the ability to adapt to the stressful event in such a way that growth goes beyond the pre-trauma level (Tedeshi, 2004).

Comparatives of people who have experienced post-traumatic growth would then show more adaptive responses following the trauma as oppose to preceding it. Imperative is the struggle with trauma, as those individuals who score highly on coping skill dimensions may not report much growth following a stressful event (Tedeshi, 2004).
Post-Traumatic Growth Statistics

Studies suggest that percentages of people who experience post-traumatic growth in response to a stressful event range from 49-59% among total study participants, and 53-63% among females, and 43-53% among males (Morris, Finch, Scott, 2007).

Some of the highest levels of post-traumatic growth appear to come from smaller subsets of the population, such as women with breast cancer, World War II bombing victims, bereaved parents, and college students (Tedeshi & Calhoun, 1996).

Some of the lowest numbers reporting post-traumatic growth come from studies of criminal victimization in South Africa.

Extraversion and openness to experience were both modestly correlated with the five domains of post-traumatic growth with correlations ranging from .15 to .28 for extraversion and .25 for openness to new experience (Tedeshi & Calhoun, 2004).

In terms of the most reported areas of change, greater appreciation of life is ranked highest, followed by relating to others, personal strength, new possibilities and spiritual change.
Defining Trauma

The American Psychological Association defines trauma as “an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster.”

The individual's subjective experience determines whether an event is traumatic or not (Saakvitne, 2000).

The traumatic event overwhelms a person’s ability to integrate the emotional experience and pose a serious threat to life, bodily integrity, or sanity. (Pearlman & Saakvitne, 2000).
Fundamental Beliefs About The Self, Others, and The World Are Shattered

According to Joseph, (2013) trauma causes a person’s life story to rupture and shatters assumptions about ourselves, others, and the world. What results is the inability to integrate the emotional experience of the trauma, which is crucial to post-traumatic growth.

The “violation” of familiar constructs and beliefs puts the person in a state of extreme confusion and insecurity as they attempt to integrate the emotional experience. Deprince and Freyd, (2002)

When personal expectations are shattered, people who experience post-traumatic growth often face many assumptions about life that are in contradiction.

Growth is paradoxical in nature. Seismic in nature, traumatic circumstances -- being uncontrollable, life threatening and irreversible -- cause an upheaval of survivors’ long standing beliefs about the world, who they are, and how they make sense of their daily lives.
The Search For New Meaning

Facing trauma appears to position a person to be more fully engaged in the process of finding meaning.

Shattering the existential world -- and all of the existential beliefs inherent in it -- trauma “clears the path” for a new meaning to be derived.

Individuals who have experienced the kind of trauma that leads to post-traumatic growth, typically become actively involved with fundamental existential questions about death and the purpose of life as a way of finding resolution.
Fundamental Beliefs Are Rebuilt

According to Janoff-Bulman (1992), a traumatic event conflicts with the three core beliefs:

- We are good, capable, and moral individuals
- Life events have meaning
- The world is benevolent

Reconstruction of one’s beliefs involves engagement in cognitive processing of the event -- essentially rethinking the event and the meaning of it -- and intentional and effortful cognitive engagement, which in turn facilitates growth (Tedeshi & Calhoun, 2004).

It is through cognitive processing that an individual “works through” the trauma and begins the process of rebuilding assumptions and beliefs about the self, others, and the world.

Cognitive Processing happens through cognitive disclosure which leads to meta-cognition, and a new life narrative.

The more beliefs are challenged by a traumatic event, the more growth will emerge (Tedeshi & Calhoun, 2004).
Individual Factors Related To Post-Traumatic Growth

Personality Characteristics

Openness
Those with an open personality style tend to think in abstract and less concrete ways, which may explain the positive correlation between openness and post-traumatic growth (.25). Faced with shattered beliefs and core schemas that no longer apply, an openness to new experience would facilitate the search for new meaning and the rebuilding of new, more relevant schemas post-trauma.

Conscientiousness
High scores on conscientiousness indicate a preference for planned, rather than spontaneous, behavior (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Those with a tendency toward conscientiousness think in concrete, logical ways, which may explain why this personality trait is not associated with post-traumatic growth.

Extraversion
Extraverts show a more open, abstract approach with an inclination toward new experience, which would explain why this trait shows a positive correlation with post-traumatic growth (.15-.28).

Agreeableness
Although agreeableness is positively correlated with good team-work skills, it is negatively correlated with leadership skills. This tendency may explain why the trait of agreeableness, although also associated with a sense of optimism, is not positively correlated with post-traumatic growth.

Neuroticism
According to Eysenck’s (1967) theory of personality, neuroticism is interlinked with low tolerance for stress or aversive stimuli (Morris, 2007). Those with this personality trait tend to partake in significant amounts of rumination and the inability to make decisions, which may explain why this trait is not positively correlated with post-traumatic growth. However, it should be noted that Neuroticism is not linked negatively to post-traumatic growth either, as research has demonstrated that positive and negative aspects of adjustment do coexist, and that compared to persons who report only positive change, those who report both positive and negative changes show more growth.
Affective Characteristics

The Trauma Constellation Identification Scale (TCIS) is a 30-item scale designed to measure maladaptive cognitive schemata and negative affect associated with a traumatic event and is a general measure of psychological distress. Shown to have high internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.94), its 15 sub-scales are divided into two higher-order factors, which both show some correlation with the psychological outcome following traumatic events. Particularly, the two higher order factors “hostile world” and “negative self schemata and affects” have been found to have significant predictive validity in distress symptoms and the likelihood of experiencing post-traumatic growth.

Both seem to predict the extent to which the individual will experience intrusive thoughts, denial of the trauma, and approach or avoidance behaviors to trauma stimuli (Davis, et al., 1990).
Post-Traumatic Growth Individual Characteristics (cont)

Affective Characteristics

Two factors most closely linked to lack of Post-Traumatic Growth

Shame and Avoidant Coping

The six affective categories of the TCIS which separately correlate strongly with post-traumatic growth include (1) helplessness (He); (2) rage (Ra); (3) fear (Fe); (4) loss (Lo); (5) shame (Sh); and (6) overwhelming emotions (OE). While all of these emotional responses can have a debilitating effect and delay the resolution of trauma, the presence of shame seems to correlate most strongly with the lack of post-traumatic growth for trauma survivors.

Additionally, a high unique vulnerability for PTSD symptomatology and lack of growth for those who employed a large number of avoidant coping strategies -- as evidenced by higher scores on the sub-scales of mistrust and isolation -- was noted with the TCIS.
Post-Traumatic Growth Individual Characteristics (cont)

Cognitive Processing

Positively Correlated with Post-Traumatic Growth

• Self Confidence in Coping

• Importance of Events

• Different from Rumination

• The Discrepancy Between Before and After The Trauma is Addressed

Negatively Correlated with Post-Traumatic Growth

• Past Orientation

• Counterfactual thinking

• Finding meaning immediately after the event
Post-Traumatic Growth Individual Characteristics (cont)

Narrative Development

• Relieves emotional inhibition

• Engage the cognitive processes that are crucial to rebuilding fundamental beliefs and developing a new narrative and sense of meaning.

• Associated with various health benefits

  • Reduced fear response

  • Top-down modulation
Post-Traumatic Growth
Individual Characteristics
(cont)

Physical Characteristics

Benefits of Physical Activity

• Recognizing possibility by acknowledging limitations

• Responsibility for choice and consequences

• Re-establishing and enhancing meaning

• Assists the sense of mastery
Post-Traumatic Growth
Individual Characteristics
(cont)

Social Support and Disclosure

Benefits of Social Support and Disclosure

• Retelling the trauma

• Ease disclosure of uniquely charged material

• Crafting of new narratives

• Restoration of intimacy
Post-Traumatic Growth

Five Domains

Fundamental concepts

• Paradoxical Element

• Dialectical thinking

• Co-exist with distress symptoms

• Increased Distress leads to enhanced growth

• Longer lasting trauma leads to enhanced growth
Post-Traumatic Growth Skills For The Clinician

• Identifying Trauma

• Understanding The Role Of Trauma On The Patient-Clinician Attachment

• Understanding and Respecting The Role Of Trauma On The Fundamental Beliefs Of The Client

• Facilitating The Development Of A New Perspective
  An improved acceptance of personal limitations.
  A greater connection with and expression of personal strength.
  Movement from extrinsic gains to intrinsic ones.
  A slower pace of life.

• Supporting The Search For New Meaning

• Supporting Client Empowerment

• The Mind-Body Connection and Identifying Client Physical Strengths
Post Traumatic Growth Websites

For Clinicians

• Post Traumatic Growth Research Group. Department of Psychology, University of North Carolina, Charlotte.
  www.ptgi.uncc.edu/what-is-ptg/

• University of Pennsylvania Positive Psychology Center.
  www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu

• Kanako Taku Post Traumatic Growth Lab
  www.kanakotaku.wordpress.com

• International Positive Psychology Association
  www.ippanetwork.org

• Tal Ben Shahar
  www.www.talbenshahar.com

• Growth Initiatives
  www.growthinitiative.org

• Trauma Recovery
  www.trauma-recovery.ca
Post Traumatic Growth Websites

For Clients:

• Dr. Melinda Moore.  
  www.posttraumaticgrowth.com
• American Psychological Association Post Traumatic Growth Inventory. 
  www.cust-cf.apa.org/ptgi/
• Professor Stephen Joseph.  
  www.profstephenjoseph.com
• Post Traumatic Growth Institute 
  www.ptgiusa.org/mission.html
• Authentic Happiness 
  www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu
• Positive Psychology News 
  www.positivepsychologynews.com
• The Good Project 
  www.www.thegoodproject.org
• Dr. Richard Rahe Post Traumatic Growth Questionnaire 
  www.drrahe.com/detail/223/
• American Psychological Association Road To Resilience 