

An Introduction to and Considerations for Posttraumatic Growth



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**NORTH AMERICAN CENTER
FOR THREAT ASSESSMENT
AND TRAUMA RESPONSE**

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To be clear, there is nothing to celebrate about trauma or events like pandemics. Many families, communities, businesses and organizations are struggling to manage their way through current circumstances. For some individuals who experience trauma, there are additional, complex and on-going difficulties as a result. However, it is important to recognize that there are some people who believe that their past traumatic experiences have contributed to positive changes in themselves and their lives over the long run. While there is a wealth of research and information on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), the concept of Posttraumatic Growth is far less recognized or understood.

One would think that those people who survived the most horrible of traumas would have the most negative outcomes, such as PTSD, but surprisingly, this is not the case. Seminal research by psychiatrist Dr. William Sledge in 1980, reported that for the American soldiers who were prisoners of war (POW's) in Vietnam, it was those who experienced the worst treatment in the POW camps that later reported the greatest benefits and most positive changes in the years following their release. When these POWs' surveys were compared with their fellow soldiers who were not captured, the results were astounding. While only 30% of the "not captured" group reported positive outcomes as a result of their Vietnam war experiences, an astonishing 61% of the POW group felt that their captivity, as horrible as it was, resulted in such positive changes as greater optimism, clearer perspectives about priorities and what was important in their lives, and their increased capacity to get along with other people. They continued to perceive these benefits years after their release. In the subsequent decades, greater research focus was directed at the other end of the "traumatic experiences" spectrum of outcomes, particularly with regards to PTSD. However, slowly and intermittently, research about the more positive outcomes of traumatic experiences was conducted.

In the early 1980's, psychology professors and researchers, Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun, after evaluating their own research and reviewing the work of others, reported the emergence of five distinct areas of positive change that people described as resulting from their traumatic experiences. These five areas, of which people described experiencing one or more, included increased inner strength, openness to new possibilities, closer/deeper relationships with family and friends, a greater appreciation for life, and an enhanced sense of spirituality. It was through this work that Tedeschi & Calhoun coined the term, "Posttraumatic Growth". Without going into greater detail, the take-away is that the majority of people will move forward after experiencing a traumatic event with perceptions of having experienced positive

growth in one or more of the five areas, while only approximately 8% of people (and up to 30% of those in certain groups, such as the POW's), will experience PTSD. This is good and hopeful news.

During and immediately following a traumatic experience, people are not thinking about growth, they are just trying to survive and weather the storm. Later, through reflection, they may become aware that their misery has not been in vain, and they perceive that there has been some value or purpose through their work of processing the event. It warrants noting that the trauma itself does not produce growth, but "what happens in the aftermath of trauma", according to Tedeschi, that leads to posttraumatic growth. For each individual, there is a different trajectory with regards to their posttraumatic growth. Also, Tedeschi has stated, that what is traumatic "is in the eye of the beholder", as some will find an experience to be traumatic while others who experience the same event will not. Tedeschi and Calhoun have determined that posttraumatic growth is something that some people will develop on their own, and that it is also something that people can be steered towards. It is through the lessons learned from trauma survivors who have experienced posttraumatic growth that we have come to understand some of the strategies that have supported their growth.

What does all of this mean for how we work with students as they return to our schools after self-isolating at home as a result of the pandemic? For one thing, we need to be cautious that we balance messages about our concerns and worries for the post-pandemic effects on the mental health our students, parents and staff. We should be careful that the language that we use will not make others assume that we can expect negative mental health outcomes for all or many. This message would not only be incorrect (based on past research) but may actually create a self-fulfilling prophecy where adults and kids expect negative mental health outcomes. On the flipside, we do not want to send the unbalanced message that we will all be enlightened and better versions of ourselves post-pandemic, because that would likely be detrimental to the minority that is expected to experience negative outcomes. We must all be mindful of the language that we use to discuss mental health so that we do not catastrophize, nor under-emphasize, our collective experiences during these uncharted times.

It is valuable to consider other ways in which Posttraumatic Growth research can guide us moving forward.

- In the field of psychology, it has long been acknowledged that to consider and process difficult experiences, as opposed to avoiding thinking about them, is the most beneficial route to healing in the future (avoidance only delays dealing with the experience at some later time and in some other form); to face and process the experience, there are two considerations
 - As difficult as it is to revisit a difficult experience, find a way to manage taking small "doses" of this re-processing, but also make sure to break up those doses by,

- Finding some relief or escape from the re-processing (i.e., healthy ways to take a break, such as physical activity, music and art expression, connecting with supportive others who will support and distract when needed)
 - In practical terms, this means that when having discussions about an event, such as the pandemic or other stressor, whether individually or with a class, whether with a child/children or adult(s), have the discussions in small doses and then find a way to take a healthy break from the difficult conversation; these conversations may not be stressful for all participants, but rest assured that there will be some who will find them distressing
- Consider ways to build in the 5 areas of Posttraumatic Growth into conversations, writing assignments, art activities, and so forth
 - **Personal strength** – help students to recognize that they may have been stronger than they ever thought that they may have been prior to the event, that they have survived this event and have coped well; this may be done by brainstorming, reflecting, sharing positive stories
 - **Relating to others in a more positive way** – read books and share stories/experiences with the theme of being more compassionate and forgiving of others, treating relationships with greater care, how it was important to *receive* emotional support and compassion, and how important it was to *give* emotional support and compassion
 - **New possibilities** – discuss if there are things that no longer seem as important as they did before the event, or things that they can no longer do; discuss new interests, capabilities and priorities that have developed
 - **Appreciation of life** – this is where discussions about gratitude would be important, particularly about gratitude for the things that they have in their life and the things that they no longer take for granted
 - **Spiritual and existential growth** – this area of posttraumatic growth encompasses a broad array of experiences, from growth in one’s religious life, to what some describe as spiritual growth, to an interest in exploring the meaning and purpose of life; depending on the context of your school community and the developmental level of those who you are working with, consider whether or not to entertain such discussions, and appropriate ways to facilitate those discussions
- One of the most important outcomes of posttraumatic growth, for both the individual and the community, is the service to others that sometimes results. From helping other survivors, whether within the family, within the community, or even further abroad, by sharing lessons learned and telling their stories, they become leaders for, and models of, the potential for posttraumatic growth. They can become the coaches and encouragers for all of us who have not been through what they have been through. In addition, when

these survivor/encouragers start to perceive themselves as a person of value who has something valuable to say and contribute, and something to offer to others who are struggling, that is, in essence, a brilliant example of their posttraumatic growth.

- Programs based on posttraumatic growth have proven successful for military personnel and first responders, and Tedeschi has explained that this is due, in part, to their program not looking at these survivors through the lens of PTSD (i.e., which implies that they are broken, disordered, and emotionally disabled), but rather as human beings that have “responded to terrible events in a human way... it’s not what is wrong with them but what has happened to them”. This lens of posttraumatic growth is much different than the medical model that wants to define what is wrong and fix it. The lens of posttraumatic growth focuses on the belief that out of terrible, traumatic events, positive and valuable changes can result. Sometimes, people start to see through this lens naturally, and sometimes we have to discover ways to encourage people to entertain looking through this lens. If facilitators are able to “frame” this perspective of posttraumatic growth, it may encourage trauma survivors to view their experience and their future in a way that is much more optimistic.
- After experiencing a traumatic event, it is important for people to be able to talk about their experience to process it, to tell their story and to create the narrative that is emerging for them. As people talk through their experience, they are able to start to figure out the changes that they are experiencing and what they are going to do with all of these thoughts and feelings. Tedeschi & Calhoun suggest that people should have friends or family in their lives who are able to take on the role of “the expert companion”. They describe “the expert companion” as someone that you can trust to be there for the duration and that you are able to talk to about your trauma. Some people have those expert companions in their family or circle of friends, but some will not and should be encouraged to seek someone out to talk to, such as a psychologist, other mental health professional, or clergy. The expert companion should be someone who does not view them through the lens of being disordered, but as human beings who have been challenged by trauma, and for whom there is value in helping them to explore and examine their experiences in order “to help them figure out how to move forward in a constructive way”.
- For people going through trauma, Tedeschi advises that they do not “numb or avoid their emotional life in the aftermath of what’s happened”, as emotions are an important barometer for how their experiences are affecting them, and it is important to feel some of those feelings (remember those “doses” of exploring one’s response to trauma that were mentioned earlier) in order to move forward. Prescribed medications and/or self-medicating that numbs emotional responses may seem helpful in the short-term but are unlikely to prove beneficial in the long run.

As we progress through this pandemic, we are all in the unique situation of experiencing this traumatic disruption to our former lives together. We are living through a collective experience of a worldwide traumatic event, however we will all experience it differently and have very different growth experiences. We can be of service to each other by listening, sharing and supporting one another, by being each other's "expert companion".