

**Posttraumatic Growth &
Combat:
Seeing possibilities for growth
and ways of promoting it.**

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PTG: Posttraumatic Growth

Posttraumatic Growth is both a process and an outcome: The experience of positive changes in oneself as a result of the struggle with traumatic events.

The rest of the story...

- Experience with combat and other traumas is not always negative or totally negative
- *More common are reports of posttraumatic growth.*

Vogt, et.al, (2004): Data from National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Scale

- Combat exposure was related to *greater* life satisfaction.

Operation Iraqi Freedom & Enduring Freedom stressors

- Cognitive
 - Information-- Too little, conflicting, rumors
 - Ambiguous or changing mission or role, rules of engagement
 - Boredom & monotony
 - Experiences that don't make sense-- Especially among young troops, belief systems are challenged

OIF/OEF stressors

- Emotional stressors
 - Family concerns
 - Losses: Stored up grief for comrades
 - Fear
 - Shame & guilt:
 - Sense of failing comrades;
 - guilt when successful--survivor guilt.

OIF/OEF stressors

- Emotional stressors
 - Helplessness:
 - asymmetrical warfare makes it hard to identify and strike enemy.
 - Carnage:
 - Sense of invulnerability is challenged
 - Killing:
 - A natural aversion that must be overcome in battle (see Grossman, 1996).

OIF/OEF stressors

- Spiritual stressors
 - Loss of faith:
 - in the chaos and apparent senselessness
 - Inability to forgive or feel forgiven:
 - Disappointments and regrets in oneself and others

Trauma--Broadly defined

- Threat to psychological integrity--
cognitive integrity -- if it represented a
severe challenge to individuals' past
ways of understanding the world and
their place in it.

Trauma & Cognition

Challenging or shattering the
assumptive world:

- benevolence
- predictability
- controllability
- sense of vulnerability and self-esteem

Trauma and narrative

- Look for the turning point in the life narrative, the watershed event. If it divides life into “before and after” it may be traumatic, and also, growth-enhancing.

Resilience vs. PTG

- Resilience: “The ability to *recover* readily from illness, depression, adversity or the like.” The ability to regain shape.
- Also, *resistance* to adversity.
- PTG: a new level of functioning and perspective--*transformative* responses to adversity.

Christianity and Suffering

- “Suffering, on the other hand, tends to plow up the surface of our lives to uncover the depths that provide greater strength of purpose and accomplishment. Only deeply plowed earth can yield bountiful harvests.”
(Graham, 1981, p. 27).

Buddhism and Suffering

- The Noble Truths are organized around the issue of suffering:
 - “There is suffering.” Do not make it personal and react to it in a habitual way.
 - “Suffering should be understood.” Embrace it rather than just react to it.
 - Practice with suffering - look at it, accept it, know it and let it be the way it is.

Existential Psychology and Suffering

Rollo May, Erich Fromm, Victor Frankl:

- The human condition or facts of existence:
 - Suffering, guilt, and transitoriness.
- By engaging these, we have the opportunity to develop meaning in living.
- Suffering doesn't have to be *mere* suffering.
- It can produce individuation (not necessarily happiness).

From the sufferers

“I am a more sensitive person, a more effective pastor, a more sympathetic counselor because of Aaron’s life and death than I would ever have been without it. And I would give up all those gains in a second if I could have my son back... But I cannot choose.”

Rabbi Harold Kushner

From the sufferers

[Trauma forces a person] "to be somebody else, the next viable you--a stripped-down whole other clear-eyed person, realistic as a sawed-off shotgun and thankful for air, not to speak of the human kindness you'll meet if you get normal luck."

Price, R. (1994). A Whole New Life.

A Sailor whose legs were amputated in a shipboard accident

- *A lot more good things have happened to me since that accident that probably wouldn't have happened. I don't regret it. I don't wish it hadn't happened.*

A Vietnam War Veteran

- *I have gained much more than I lost from being in Vietnam. The taste is sweeter. The flowers are more beautiful. The delights of this earth are more fully appreciated and enjoyed.*

Posttraumatic Growth Inventory

- Quantifying posttraumatic growth--Empirically derived domains:
 - New Possibilities,
 - Relating to Others,
 - Personal Strength,
 - Appreciation of Life,
 - Spiritual Change.
 - Tedeschi & Calhoun (1996); Taku, Cann, Calhoun & Tedeschi (2008)

5 Domains of PTG

- Have you seen any of these changes in people with combat experience?
 - a) Yes
 - b) No

Assumptions and Predictions

- It's not the trauma, it's the struggle.
- People first struggle to survive, not grow.
- Psychological fitness and PTG: It's curvilinear.
- Illusions: Yes and No.
- PTG and distress coexist.
- There are various routes to growth.

Levels of Distress and PTG

- Generally, greater distress is related to greater PTG, but not always.
- Lechner et al.(2003) reported breast cancer patients differed in reports of PTG according to stage of the disease, with those in middle stage higher than others.

Cognitive Processing & PTG

- 56 disaster response workers provided data at two times over 6 months.
- Greater experience of fear, helplessness and horror combined with an approach or acceptance attitude toward death were associated with increasing PTG over time. (Linley & Joseph, 2006)

Cognitive Processing & PTG

- In recent amputees, PTG was only related to positive cognitive processing, focusing mental attention on meaning-making rather than negative rumination facilitates PTG. (Phelps, et. al, 2008)

PTG & Self-disclosure & Support/Constraint

- Breast cancer survivors (Cordova et al., 2001): Social constraint from friends and family associated with less cognitive processing and less PTG.
- Husbands of breast cancer survivors (Weiss, 2002): Social support related to acknowledgement of fear and to PTG.

Is PTG an “American” concept?

- There are reports of PTG across cultures--Israel, China, Turkey, Germany, Bosnia, Japan, Holland, Australia, Switzerland, and others.

Combat-related PTG

- Speed, Engdahl, and colleagues (1989) reported that 47% of 62 former World War II POW's reported that they had benefited in some way from their POW experience.

- Sledge, Boydstun, & Rabe (1980): 61% of USAF repatriated Vietnam War POWs perceived their imprisonment experience as beneficial.
 - Those POW's reported significantly more physical and mental suffering during captivity than other POW's.
 - They also had more difficulties on repatriation and twice as high a divorce rate after return as other POW's.

PTG in Vietnam Veterans

PTG related to:

- Injury during evasion or captivity
- Suffering during combat or captivity
- Torture severity
- PTSD
- Helping others through disclosure
- Working on community problems or in politics
- Perceived helpfulness of homecoming support
- (Sonis, Tedeschi, & Sledge, in prep)

McGrath & Linley (2006)

PTG and TBI

- PTGI factors presented were highly relevant to TBI and resonated with patients' experience. Scores were relatively high.
- Later stage (> 1 year post-TBI) had higher PTG than patients entering rehab for first time.
- Anxiety related to PTG.

Being a Growth-oriented “Expert Companion”

Opportunities for family, friends,
comrades, and others who will
listen.

Why “Expert Companion?”

- Without companionship, expertise is hollow.
- Downplay expertise—even if you think you have “been there”.
- Stories need to be told, and experiences need to be understood--this takes time and good listening.

Why “Expert Companion?”

- Reasons to downplay expertise:
 - Every trauma and death is different.
 - People are experts on their own experience.
 - Cultural differences are important in trauma and grief.
 - Your humanity is crucial.
 - It takes the pressure off of you.

Who is the “Expert Companion?””

- a) A person who listens to the worst.
- b) A person who learns from the survivor.
- c) A person who tolerates the “craziness.”
- d) A person who is there for the long haul.

Expertise and Myths

- No “time limits.”
- It is a gradual process.
- There are great individual differences.
- Time itself isn’t so important.
- The assumption that a traumatized or grieving person is going to go through certain phases or stages in a predictable sequence may not be helpful—it is usually more chaotic than this.

Expertise and Myths

- There may not be “closure.”
- Those suffering loss continue to be attached.
- Look for alternatives to talk, other ways of expression.
- Action sometimes is a proxy for talk, especially in men.
- Trauma survivors often must re-understand everything, and this can lead to *Posttraumatic Growth*.

You are working with paradox

- Take action and don't: Patience vs. avoidance
- Accept help and don't: Vulnerability and weakness
- It is unique and common: Upward and downward comparisons
- Pain needs to be addressed but not necessarily eliminated. Distress fuels growth.

Practice *humility*, and a new way of *listening*...

- Focus on listening, without necessarily trying to solve.
- Listen in a way that allows change in yourself, rather than being intent on doing the changing.

Face the Worst Things Directly and Together

- Often using metaphors
- Facing ambiguity and uncertainty
- Facing mortality
- Struggling with counterfactuals
- Refer to growth *caused by the individual's struggle to survive* and come to terms with what has happened.

Aiding The Ways to Cope with Seismic Events:

- Encourage *reflection* instead of brooding
- Manage Emotional Distress
- Reconsider Beliefs and Goals
- Revise the Life Narrative--the short-term and the long-term

Your Expert Companion?

- Have you ever needed an expert companion?
 - a) Yes
 - b) No

Your Expert Companion?

- Is Yes, did you find one?
 - a) Yes
 - b) No

Your Expert Companion?

Who?

a)Family

b)Friend

c)Clergy

d)Professional

e)Other

Making Connections:

Are there expert companions out there?

- Friends or family if possible.
- Civic and volunteer groups (help others!).
- Faith-based organizations.
- Web-based groups.

Books on PTG

- Tedeschi & Calhoun (1995) *Trauma and transformation*. Sage
- Tedeschi, Park, & Calhoun (1998) *Posttraumatic growth*. LEA
- Calhoun & Tedeschi (1999) *Facilitating posttraumatic growth*. LEA
- Tedeschi & Calhoun (2004) *Helping bereaved parents*. Brunner-Routledge
- Calhoun & Tedeschi (2006) *Handbook of posttraumatic growth*. LEA

Contact me for more references and discussion of research and practice

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